



NEW LINE CINEMA
AN ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY PUBLICATION

FINAL DESTINATION

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL

DEATH OF THE SENSES

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BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION PICTURE
'FINAL DESTINATION' CREATED BY JEFFREY REDDICK

ONE

The only thing colder than a New York winter, Jack Curtis mused as he trudged through the deepening snow on Tenth Avenue, was a New Yorker faced with a homeless man. Almost invariably, his mere presence would be met with a slight turning away of the head, a firm flick of the eyes into a straight-ahead stare and a set expression that suggested anything and anyone in their peripheral vision had just become invisible.

On the other hand, it was better than being abused. Jack rarely had to worry about that; even hunched up in his battered overcoat to keep warm, it was instantly obvious to anybody who took the time to register his existence that he had the size and build of a former football player. Lonnie, on the face that just seemed to attract trouble. Even with Jack next to him, Lonnie frequently drew insults from passers-by if he dared ask for help, and Jack knew from past experience that when Lonnie went off on his own he was a magnet for surly cops, drunken jocks and street crazies. The huge cut under his right eye had appeared only a couple days before, when a dispute over a sleeping space had ended with Lonnie being slashed with a broken bottle.

Lonnie was twitchy at the best of times. Now, on their way to the fourth homeless shelter of the night in the hope of finding somewhere, anywhere, that wasn't already full, he seemed on the verge of a complete breakdown.

"I'm tellin' you, I'm tellin' you," he stuttered, "I can't take it any more. I can't! It's just... it just gets worse! Every day, it gets worse. There's no way out, Jack, no way. I can't..."

He tailed off, pausing as they passed a trash can. For a moment Jack thought he was going to delve into it in the hope of finding food, an act that Jack's pride had never permitted him to do, but instead he bent down to retrieve a cigarette butt from the slush next to the can. Lonnie scrutinized it like a jeweler examining a diamond, then dropped it into a pocket.

"Those things'll kill you," Jack said, annoyed at having to stop. Manhattan's streets channeled the wind into a biting, stabbing knife of ice, and keeping moving was the only way to provide any respite, however illusory.

"Yeah, well, good!" Lonnie snapped. "Least that way I won't feel the cold any more!" He abruptly set off again, Jack having to jog for a couple of steps to catch up. "I mean, shit! What's the point? What's the point of going on living?"

"Don't say that," said Jack, knowing where this was going. It was a conversation he'd had with Lonnie several times before, but each time Lonnie became more and more vehement—and desperate.

"No! Seriously!" Lonnie protested. "I'm never going to get out of this! Every time I think things can't get any worse, I fall into a whole new layer of shit! It's pushin' me, Jack, it's pushin' me."

"You think being dead's better than being alive?" Jack demanded, growing angry. "It's not." Unbidden, unwanted, the memory flashed into his mind. A blur unexpectedly taking on perfect sharpness ahead of him, a flash of red... "Nobody's better off dead," he said, almost to himself.

"Yeah, well, you just keep tellin' yourself that," Lonnie said, an unpleasantly shrill tone entering his voice. Jack lifted his face into the bitter, snow-flecked wind to look at him. "I guess you know all about dead people, right?"

"Lonnie..." Jack warned.

"No, no," Lonnie continued, ignoring him. "You know what? I wish I'd been there! I wish that'd been me! Then I wouldn't have had to go through all this!" He waved his arms at the darkened, snow-covered streets around him. "Doesn't matter if I die, 'cause I've been in hell for all this time already!" He hopped over the mound of brown slush that had built up along the edge of the sidewalk and stepped into the road. The street was almost empty, but a cab still hooted at him as it pulled across to give him a wide berth. "Come on!" he yelled up at the sky. "Come on, take me! I've had enough! Put me the fuck out of my misery!"

Jack jumped into the street after him, his battered holdall slapping against his side. He grabbed Lonnie by his collar and pulled him back

to the sidewalk. "Jesus, Lonnie! Are you *trying* to get killed?"

Lonnie slapped angrily at Jack's hands. "Don't you touch me! Get the hell off!" He twisted himself free and stood there, glaring at Jack. "You think things are suddenly going to get better? You think something's going to magically change and your life'll turn right around? *Look at you!*" he screamed. "You're nothing! No job, no home, no money, no *chance!* The only difference between you and me is that I *know* I'm nothing!"

"Well then," Jack said, struggling to keep his temper under control, "maybe you should just kill yourself right now, so neither of us have to put up with you any more. How about that?"

Lonnie stared at him in speechless fury for a long moment. "Fuck you!" he finally spat. "Fuck you!" Still facing Jack, he stumbled through the slush and onto the road, slowly walking backwards across it.

Jack moved to the edge of the sidewalk, quickly glancing up and down the street for oncoming cars. Fortunately, there was nothing approaching through the blowing snow. "Lonnie! Where are you going?"

"Away from you!"

"What about the shelter?" Jack called, pointing a thumb down the street in the direction they'd been walking.

"I'll find my own God-damn shelter! Or maybe I'll just freeze to death in a corner somewhere! That's what you want, huh?"

"Lonnie!"

Lonnie reached the far side of the road, turning and heading for the next intersection. "Don't you follow me!" he yelled, jabbing an angry finger at Jack as he went.

Jack stared after him. "Shit," he finally muttered. He knew from experience that there was no point trying to talk to Lonnie now; he'd have to try to find him the next day and see if he'd calmed down, assuming he managed to stay out of trouble for the night.

In the meantime, he was freezing. Pulling his coat as tightly around himself as he could, Jack set off down Tenth Avenue once more.

Amy Tom gazed glumly out of the window of the police precinct. Snow, snow and more snow. The sky was starting to clear, holes opening in the clouds to allow moonlight to cut through, but that would only make the night even colder. Great.

She sighed, and checked her belt again. Gun, speed loaders, pepper spray, handcuffs, flashlight, nightstick, radio. All present and correct. She checked them again anyway, because it delayed the moment when she had to fasten her coat over all of them, which in turn delayed the moment when she finally had to step out into the cold.

A man's hard, raspy voice sounded behind her. "Tom! Quit screwin' around and get your rice-eatin' ass in gear."

She turned to see Beriev looking coldly at her, one hand on the handle of his nightstick. "Get your own ass in gear, you beetroot-munching old bastard," she answered in a voice as hard as his. There was a pause as they stared each other down... then both officers cracked into smiles. "Heyyy!" she said, pointing at him.

"Hey, Amy!" Beriev replied as he walked over, slapping her affectionately on one arm. Amy couldn't remember at what moment in their now eight-month-long partnership they'd started mocking each other's ancestry—hers Chinese, his Russian—or even which of them had started it. She had a feeling it was her. Either way, it had provided them with a uniquely twisted little bond, making the thirty-year age difference between them seem irrelevant. She'd learned a hell of a lot about being a good cop from Beriev.

"How you tonight, Pete?" she asked. Beriev's face screwed up.

"Cold. Damn cold."

"Yeah, I hear it affects old folks first."

"Damn kids," Beriev grinned, swatting at her shoulder. He peered through the window. "Jeez. Look at that."

Amy fastened her coat. "Least there won't be many people about tonight, right?"

"No *ordinary* people," Beriev corrected. "Still as many bad guys as any other night."

"Great. Still, at least they'll be easier to spot, I guess."

"I guess." Beriev jingled a set of keys. "Well, let's roll."

"Which car we in?"

"Two-oh-one."

Amy braced herself, then opened the door. The cold wind that rushed in was even more cutting than she'd expected. "That better not be the one with the busted heater." She pulled on her gloves, huddled down into her coat and scurried out into the dark, Beriev waddling along behind her.

So much for shelter number four. As Jack had expected, the place had been full. The volunteer working the desk had given him a couple of suggestions for where to try next, but the disillusioned tone in her voice hadn't given Jack any confidence of having more luck elsewhere. At least he'd got some soup and a slightly stale roll out of his visit.

He reached an intersection a couple of blocks south of the shelter, and stood for a moment on the corner, wondering which way to go. The nearest shelter the volunteer had suggested was further downtown, but Jack suspected its proximity would have made it the first choice for the numerous other homeless people that she'd already been forced to turn away that evening. But if he headed east, across town, he might have more of a chance of getting in somewhere else. Maybe.

He decided to take the chance. Besides, Lonnie had been going across town when he'd left—there was a possibility he might run into him. Hopefully he would have calmed down by now.

Warm lights beckoned from across the street, a coffee house with a few customers hardy or caffeine-addicted enough to brave the cold for the prize of a hot drink. For a brief moment Jack considered crossing the road to go in, but thought better of it. With the painfully small amount of money he had in the world—the last time he'd checked, in his pockets he had three dollar bills and a couple of coins, along with the long-useless key to his old home—coffee was a luxury he couldn't afford. Especially at coffee house prices.

Shrugging, he set off along the street. The buildings on his side were Nineteenth century brownstones, judging from the number of buzzers by the doors having been converted from houses into apartments. Expensive apartments at that, he guessed from the fancy cars and SUVs parked nearby. New York was a strange town. Luxury and poverty could be separated by only a few blocks, but it might as well be a million miles.

That said... there might be a way to find shelter for the night right here, without trudging across half of Manhattan. There was a narrow alley between two of the brownstone terraces. Alleys led to places—back doorways, garages, unsecured stairwells, places that might have a roof above and a dry floor. Hell, if he was lucky there might even be heating, though that would be too much to hope for.

Looking quickly around to make sure he wasn't being glared at from a window by the local Neighborhood Watch committee, Jack started down the alley. It was a lot darker than the street, the only dim light coming from a lonely yellow steel-grilled lamp on the wall by the base of a fire escape, but there was definite promise. The alley widened out past the backs of the brownstones to reveal rows of garages on each side, and another fire escape descending from one of the buildings, shrouded in corrugated metal with an open gate at the bottom. Heated it certainly wasn't, but it was covered, and maybe he could find some newspapers or cardboard in the dumpsters nearby—

Jack suddenly realized he was not alone.

Standing in the shadows next to one of the dumpsters was a tall man wearing a thick hooded coat. The coat looked clean, and new. Jack couldn't see the man's face inside the hood, the deep, all-concealing shadows making him feel as though he was being watched by a black hole.

"Hey," said Jack cautiously. He slowly moved around the dumpsters, taking care to keep as much distance as he could between himself and the other man. The frosting of snow on the hood and the shoulders suggested that he'd been standing there for a while.

No answer. Jack looked him up and down. Blue jeans, black work boots which seemed as new as the coat. If the guy were homeless...

but Jack dismissed the idea as soon as it occurred to him. New clothes. The man obviously had money. He wasn't homeless.

So why was he standing in a dark alley in the snow?

"Okay..." Jack said, opening his hands and stepping back as cautiously as he had advanced. "This is your alley, I get it. I'll be on my way."

The man took a quick step forward, making Jack flinch. He was bigger than the hooded figure by a couple of inches, but something about the way the man held himself suggested menace. Light from the lamp cut into the darkness inside the hood, revealing intense, unblinking eyes set in a craggy, middle-aged face, staring at Jack with cold disinterest.

"While the Eye of Artemis is at its widest, so shall my work be done," said the man in a low voice. "The senses of this city shall be purified."

"R-right!" Jack exclaimed, stepping backwards to widen the gap between them. Whoever the man was, he was a nut, and not a person to share an alley with. "I'll just leave you to your... purifying, then. Okay, fine. Have fun." Still walking backwards, he reached the entrance to the alley and hurried around the corner onto the street. The man had shown no sign of following him, but that didn't stop Jack from looking back over his shoulder every few steps.

Jesus. He realized his heart was racing as a result of the encounter. Still, at least he felt warm for the first time in days.

Beriev slowed the patrol car and eased it around the corner, heading west.

"So, you planning to move to Florida when you retire?" Amy asked.

"Huh?"

"I mean, you drive slow enough to fit right in with the little old ladies down there."

"Oh, hardy har," Beriev answered. "You listen, I've been on the force for thirty-three years now. Not a single scratch on any vehicle

I've driven. I take care of every piece of equipment I'm issued. And you know why?"

"Respect for public property?"

"Hell no!" Beriev smirked. "It's 'cause if I damage it, it comes out of my wages!"

"Good point." After the first few uncomfortable and chilly minutes, the car had finally warmed up enough to be tolerable. Amy glanced to each side, checking the street. As she'd predicted, the city seemed almost deserted, the handful of people still around hurrying to the warmth of their destinations.

With a few exceptions.

"This is what I was tellin' you," Beriev said, slowing the car even more to point out two men standing in front of a closed shop ahead, televisions flickering in its window behind the security grille. "See these guys? Everyone else tonight is in a rush to get home, but these clowns..."

"Lights?" Amy suggested, hovering a finger over a switch on the central console.

Beriev grinned. "Yeah. Let's see what they do."

Amy flicked the switch. The lights on the patrol car's roof came to life, blue and red strobes sweeping the street. The two men outside the shop visibly jumped, twitching in panicked indecision for a few seconds before moving off at a brisk pace. Both Beriev and Amy stared hard at them as the car passed, making sure the men knew they were under observation. Amy watched them through the rear window as Beriev turned the lights off again.

"Suspicious behavior, wouldn't you agree?" she said.

"Yup."

"We gonna bust them?"

"In this weather?" Beriev snorted as the car picked up speed again. "Yeah, right! No, we'll keep going, then swing back this way in ten minutes or so, see if they've come back. If they're still hanging around, we'll see what they're up to. But on a night like this, the only reasons to get out of the car are to make an arrest, grab a coffee, take a piss... or to go home to bed at the end of the shift."

"That's what I love about you, Pete," said Amy, grinning. "You've always got something to teach me."

Beriev smiled warmly back. "Just glad to have somebody who appreciates the lessons." He turned his attention back to the road ahead. "Okay, now what do we have here..."

Amy followed his gaze. A scruffily-dressed man with a bag slung over one shoulder was walking in their direction. He seemed worried about being followed, his head turning to check behind him every few steps.

"Look at this filthy scumbag," Beriev remarked with disgust. "Jesus!"

"Give him a break, Pete," said Amy, looking at the long-haired figure with sympathy. "He's homeless."

"Right, and the entire world's conspired against him to reduce him to this terrible state," Beriev said, voice full of sarcasm. "If I'd had a buck for every bogus hard-luck story I've heard, I *coulda* retired to Florida by now." He slowed the car again, leaning forward for a better look as they approached. Amy did the same. The man looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, but it was hard to tell under his matted, snow-specked hair and straggly beard. Six-two, maybe one-eighty pounds, dark blue coat, blue jeans, grey sneakers, khaki bag on a shoulder strap. She mentally filed the description. You never knew when a person might turn up again.

The man appeared surprised when he looked round to see a police car slowly prowling past with two cops watching him, but to Amy's eyes he didn't seem anything more than that. He certainly didn't have any of the typical over-compensating, what-me-suspicious mannerisms of a low-end crook caught in the act. Just another unfortunate trapped in the no job-no rent-no home-no job cycle of New York. They made eye contact for a moment, before the car moved on. "Poor guy."

"Poor guy my hairy white ass," Beriev sniffed. "You mark my words, you'll feel the same way as me after a few years of having to wipe off these guys' piss and puke when you pull 'em out of somebody's doorway."

Amy didn't reply, instead looking back at the man in the rear-view mirror for a moment. For some odd reason, she felt as though she was going to run into him again.

Cops, thought Jack. What was their problem?

Still, at least this time they hadn't decided to stop and harass him. There was something to be said for this weather after all.

The cop driving the car was a typical example of the kind he'd had the most encounters with on the streets, none of which he considered even slightly pleasant. Burly, moustachioed, ageing, decidedly short-tempered. The Sipowicz brigade, always expecting the worst from him and not shy of trying to provoke it.

The young Asian policewoman had looked cute, though.

"Hey," grunted Beriev, shifting in his seat, "how 'bout a coffee?" He gestured at a coffee shop further up the street.

"Jeez, Pete," said Amy, "we've been out on patrol for what, twenty minutes? Didn't you have one at the precinct?"

"Yup," Beriev replied, swinging the car across the street towards the curb, "and I now need another one. You not noticed how cold it is? Plus, to tell you the truth, I also need one of the *other* reasons I told you about to get out of the car." He fidgeted in his seat as he brought the car to a stop outside the coffee house, leaving the engine running as he fumbled with his seatbelt.

"Another sign of old age," Amy told him. "Loss of bladder control."

"Hardy har. You coming?"

Amy peered through the window, where the snow was whipping past, driven by the wind. "I'll wait here, thanks."

"Want anything?"

"Double-hit mocha with cream and sprinkles if you're buying, thanks."

"Taking advantage of an old man..." she heard Beriev mutter as he climbed out of the car. A freezing draught swept around her before

he closed the door. She shivered.

The light from several televisions, all tuned to the same channel, caught Jack's eye as he approached a shop. Men were genetically compelled to look at television screens even if they were already face-to-face with a beautiful woman, somebody had once jokingly told him.

It had been Jennifer. The brief feeling of amusement at the thought faded and died.

The statement had probably been correct, though—he couldn't help looking at the TVs as he walked past. An attractive young blonde woman was excitedly delivering a news report to camera, the headline "Nightclub Blaze" flashing up on screen, followed by "Chelsea Cox LIVE." God. A building in flames behind her, possibly still people in it, and the woman seemed thrilled. "Death Toll Rising" came a new headline. He turned away and continued up the street. He didn't want to think about death any more tonight.

A roaring crash from ahead made him jump. Damn it! He was still on edge from his encounter with the weird guy in the alley. But the noise was just a garbage truck tipping the contents of a trash can into its grinding maw. Metal screeched against metal, a rancid stench assaulting his nostrils. Trash overflowed from the back of the truck and dropped onto the street.

The garbage man, who was studiously ignoring the spilled trash, seemed as unhappy as Jack about being out on a night like this. He glanced at the logo on the side of the truck as he walked past. "Donahue." If he ever managed to get another job, Jack decided, he hoped it wouldn't be with them. He knew that he didn't exactly smell like a perfume counter right now, but *voluntarily* stinking of garbage...

He moved on, approaching another intersection. He looked up to get his bearings from the street signs. Eighth Avenue... and beyond the signs, on the opposite corner of the intersection, he got the first smile he'd had all day. A face on a billboard beamed back at him, a

young woman. It took a few moments for Jack to recognize her. Katie Astin, who'd been the teen star of a sitcom some years back. Attractive, but still jailbait, he'd thought at the time.

Well, now she was all grown up. And still attractive... but also still untouchable. Katie Astin had clearly found God since her days of jiggling around in a tight T-shirt. Now she was wearing a white blouse, though one that still showed off a certain amount of cleavage, her hands spread wide around the words "See the light and feel the love."

Nice sentiment, Jack thought, but he needed something more concrete right now. "Share the love of the Lord with Katie Astin," read a caption below her. "Three times weekly on..." One of the lights illuminating the billboard flickered and died at that moment, dropping the rest of the text and the station logo into darkness. Oh, sure. He'd tune right in and feel the love—just as soon as he got a TV.

Jack reached the crossroads and checked for traffic. There were a few cars on the street, so he stopped and waiting for the crossing lights to change. A low, thudding beat grew louder and closer. He looked again, to see an SUV approaching. If the music were this loud outside the car, he hated to think how deafening it must be inside.

The traffic lights changed to red, and the "Walk" sign across the street lit up. He set off across the road—but even over the pulse of the music, Jack could hear the SUV's engine revving up as the driver tried to beat the lights. He snapped his head round to see the oversized car accelerating at him—then it suddenly slewed to one side as the driver stamped on the brakes, the wheels sliding helplessly through the snow and slush covering the road. Jack jumped back onto the sidewalk just before the SUV slithered to a halt, completely straddling the crossing and pointing towards the curb at a forty-five degree angle.

The muffled music burst into blaring clarity as the windows of the SUV lowered, revealing itself to be gangsta rap. Jack didn't know the song, and from the fact that the first lyrics he could make out were "*I don't take no shit from no motherfuckin' bitch,*" he didn't want to either. To his complete lack of surprise, all four of the faces glaring at

him from inside the SUV were white, and way too young to be legally drinking the cans of beer they were holding.

"Hey, asshole!" yelled one of the kids from under his baseball cap. "Get the hell out of the road!"

"Yeah, asshole!" echoed the kid in the back seat, who looked like a younger, even skinnier version of the first.

"Jesus!" cried the driver, slapping his hands against the steering wheel. "Mom'll kill me if I ding the car! Asshole!" he added as an afterthought, looking at Jack.

"Any more?" Jack asked, looking at the fourth kid.

"Asshole!"

"Okay." He was tempted to kick the car and cave in one of its door panels purely to teach the kids a lesson, but held himself back, remembering the police car that had looked him over just minutes earlier. Drinking or not, they were middle-class kids in an expensive new car and he was a homeless man with everything he owned in a single bag. He doubted the cops would see his side of the story. Instead, he gave them a mocking salute. "You drive safely, now."

A chorus of "Asshole!" was his only reply as the SUV roared off, wheels spinning in the slush. "*Grab ma Uzi an' shoot that floozy, 'cause I'm a hardcore killa!*" continued the song, which cut off as the windows powered shut again, to Jack's relief. Sure, he'd listened to some Public Enemy and Ice Cube in his teens, but this new stuff just seemed sadistic...

Shaking his head, he set off over the crossing again, making it to the other side without incident, and continued along the road. He passed several shops, all closed—not that he could have afforded anything he saw in the windows—until his attention was caught by bright lights ahead. It looked like a convenience store. Soup and a stale roll or no, he was still starving.

He stopped outside a bookstore, peering with disinterest through the window as he fumbled in his pockets for what little money he had. A brunette woman looked back at him from the covers of a stack of books, fixing him with a sly smile as she lifted a cream-covered strawberry to her mouth in an exaggeratedly sexualized way. *Sensual Kitchen* read the title, the only name on the cover being the single

word "Dominique." Another celebrity chef. Just what the world needed.

Well, she could choke on her sexual strawberry while he saw what culinary delights he could get for... three dollars and twenty-six cents.

Enough for a beer, part of his mind reminded him. *Or two*. He ignored it. Instead, he might just have enough for some bread, maybe a packet of pastrami or something...

His heart sank as he reached the brightly-lit storefront. It was a convenience store, all right—if you were in urgent need of porn. He stared at his distorted reflection in the silvered windows of the adult bookstore. God, he looked... like nothing. Lonnie had been right.

Disconsolate, he was about to restart his futile trek towards the shelter, when something burst in his head with a cold far deeper than anything he'd ever felt on the streets.

Amy checked her watch. Damn it, what was Pete doing? She tried to look into the coffee house, but the windows were steamed up. She couldn't make out anyone standing at the counter, though, so presumably he was still in the john. Knowing the lack of enthusiasm with which coffee shop barristas served their customers late at night—she'd done her time serving lattes when she was younger—that meant it would be the best part of five minutes before he got back with the coffee.

Still, at least she was fairly warm in the car, and the intermittent radio traffic suggested a quiet night. She turned her attention to the street. Nice houses, not that she'd ever be able to afford one on a police salary...

Who was that?

Amy leaned closer to the window, trying to get a better look. She was certain she'd just seen a shape in the alley between two of the brownstones. It had ducked back into the shadows the moment it realized she was looking in its direction...

There it was again!

Somebody was hiding in the darkness of the alley, presumably waiting for herself and Beriev to drive away. She caught a quick glimpse through the gloom and swirling snow of a tall man, face shrouded by a hood.

Amy looked back at the coffee house. Still no sign of Beriev. Damn it! She peered at the alley, shielding her eyes from the streetlights and waiting for them to adjust to the darkness. The shape was still there, a patch of blackness only just discernible against the slightly lighter wall of the alley. Whoever the man was, he was definitely trying to stay out of her sight.

Lurking on a public street wasn't a crime in itself... but it was definitely suspicious. Which meant—crap!—she was going to have to get out of the car after all and head out into the snow. She took one last look at the coffee house in case Beriev had finally reappeared, but whatever he was doing, he was still doing it. Was he reading the damn paper or something?

Muttering a curse under her breath, she unfastened her seatbelt, opened the door and stepped reluctantly out into the cold.

The moon in the sky, phases flashing across it impossibly quickly...

A circular table...

Faces, blurred, distorted, flickering past too fast to see them...

Distant laughter...

Clouds speeding over the city, swallowing it in night...

The moon turning to black...

A flash. Light reflecting on metal. A knife...

A dark, narrow passageway, the ground covered in snow...

A woman's face...

Blood gushing from a wound, a slashed throat...

Another woman, screaming...

Empty eye sockets, swimming with black, glistening ooze...

The knife descending, stabbing into flesh...

A man's face, ruined, a wet hole in its center...

Severed hands, fingers still twitching...

A woman wailing in pain, face running with streaks of blood...

Another man clutching at his head...

The knife slowly peeling through skin, an ear falling away like meat carved from a roast...

A woman struggling for breath, eyes wide...

A gaping mouth, white teeth speckled with red, nothing beyond them but emptiness...

A face, somehow familiar yet oddly *wrong*, distorted in some bizarre way, lurching backwards, trying to escape from something unseen...

The table again, seen from above, a five-pointed star with dark pools at each of the points, a bigger pool at the center, something resting in the dark liquid...

The moon again, blooming from a tiny crescent to a full circle, blazing with light in the sky...

And behind it all, a man's voice, "While the Eye of Artemis is at its widest, so shall my work be done. The senses of this city shall be purified..."

Jack gasped, the cold air searing the back of his throat as he fought for breath. He'd been looking at his reflection in the window, then...

Now he was slumped against the wall of the adult bookstore, cold snow soaking through his jeans, one cheek pressed against the slick glass.

What the hell had just happened to him?

He struggled to his feet, realizing as the wind hit his face that he was drenched in sweat. Still unsteady, he looked around. Nobody else was in sight; no one had witnessed his... attack, whatever it was. If it had been a hallucination it had been a spectacularly unpleasant one, the nightmarish images still swimming dizzily through his mind

Jack froze. He knew what one of the images was, without any doubt. The dark passageway, snow on the ground—it had been the alley where he'd encountered the crazy guy in the coat.

The crazy guy who'd been talking about... *purifying*.

And the woman, the woman whose throat he'd just somehow seen cut... was the Asian policewoman who'd driven past him.

Jack had no idea how or why he knew, but he was certain that he *did* know—she was about to die. In the alley, at the hands of the man in the coat. A block and a half back the way he'd come.

He started to run.

Amy could see light further down the alley, but there was no sign of the man. Taking out her flashlight, she shone it down the narrow passage, sweeping it from left to right and back again. Still no sign of him.

Pointing it downwards, though, she saw fresh, cleanly-marked footprints in the snow. Two different sets of prints, though the freshest was also the most common. Whoever was lurking between the buildings, he'd been there for a while.

She moved carefully up the alley, shining her flashlight alternately on the ground and across the walls. Still no sign of her lurker. A dim yellow glow came from a wall light by a fire escape to one side. She played the light over the metal structure; no sign of anyone on the steps.

The alley widened behind the houses, and Amy moved warily to the nearest wall, shining her light around the corner to make sure nobody was hiding behind it. Nothing there. That meant either the guy had gone up the other, enclosed fire escape, was hiding behind the dumpsters, or had cut and run all the way to the far end of the alley while she was getting out of the car. Her light fell on the snow beyond the dumpsters. No footprints. None by the other fire escape either. That only left one place.

She realized her hand was shaking slightly, and it wasn't from the cold. Still no sign of Beriev emerging from the coffee house. Shit! She was really starting not to like this situation.

Amy transferred her flashlight to her other hand, and slowly unclipped the safety strap over her holster, sliding her fingers around the butt of her revolver. She was a perfectly good shot with it; but that had been in practice. She'd only twice taken her gun out of its holster while on duty, and never fired it at a live target.

She moved warily around the dumpsters. "Hello?" she said, immediately feeling foolish that her voice sounded so weak. "I know you're there," she said, more forcefully. "This is the police. Show yourself! Slowly."

No movement except the snow. Nobody was hiding between the first two dumpsters, though she could see footprints around all of them. Only one left-

No one there either.

That meant the only place the lurker could be hiding was *inside* one of the dumpsters, and as long as he was there, she could wait for Beriev to arrive; her quarry wasn't going anywhere without a lot of noise and effort. She let out a relieved sigh, her breath steaming away from her. To her surprise, she realised that her gun was halfway out of the holster, her hand clutched tightly around it. She let it fall back into place-

Something hit her, hard.

Jack raced down the street, lungs burning. He couldn't remember the last time he'd run so far, so fast. The televisions flashed past; ahead he could see the warm glow from the coffee house windows, a man and a woman emerging, their faces turning towards him as they saw him coming. The dark sliver of the alley between the brownstones was growing wider with every step.

Amy's vision swam, colored lights blazing across her sight as something made a loud cracking noise. It took her a moment to realize that the crack was the sound of her own skull hitting the ground, hard, the covering of snow doing nothing to lessen the pain.

She felt dizzy. Something large was moving above her, growing taller. The lurker.

Gun—

She struggled to make her hand move, forcing it towards the holster. No metal, just leather. It was empty. The gun had fallen out,

landing silently in the snow somewhere out of sight. She tried to lift her head to look for it, but couldn't move...

The dark shape was above her now, a silhouette against the dimly-lit wall of the building. Some analytical part of her mind was still working through the haze, realizing where her attacker had hidden—he'd jumped up and grabbed the ladder of the first, open fire escape, then climbed off it onto a ledge on the wall, hiding around the corner *above* where she'd shone her flashlight.

A lot of good that knowledge did her now! Move!

But she couldn't. All she could feel was pain slowly spreading through her body, the numbing cold of the snow not holding it back.

The shape took on form, a tall man, his face a black void inside his hood. One hand slipped into his coat, slowly drawing out a knife.

Move—

The figure took a step forward, standing over her. The knife blade caught the sickly yellow light of the lamp, revealing a long, serrated edge.

Move! Please...

The man leaned down, his empty hand stretching out and grasping her by the throat. Amy could feel his fingers and thumb flexing, forcing the collar of her coat downwards, uncovering her neck and squeezing tighter.

The knife descended...

Jack tore around the corner into the alley, feet struggling for grip in the snow. He could see two figures, one motionless on the ground, the other bending down over it. Something in the tall figure's hand, a knife-

He tackled the man, throwing himself at him from a good six feet away and catching him right at the waist with his shoulder. They both went down, knocked clear of the woman on the ground.

Jack tried to get up, but the other man was writhing beneath him, already recovered and striking at him with his knees. Jack twisted just in time to avoid a blow to the groin, but even so the kick to his

thigh was painful. He threw a punch in the direction of the man's head, feeling it connect with the side of his hood.

The knife! Hell, where was the knife? The man hadn't dropped it—

It flashed up and around, catching a glint of cold white light at the top of its arc from a flashlight lying in the snow. Then it descended, ripping through the sleeve of Jack's coat and the skin beneath. Jack cried out and rolled away as the knife stabbed down again, kicking up a spray of snow as it hit the ground with a clang of metal.

Jack stumbled back, trying to get to his feet, but the other man was already up and turning towards him. A foot lashed out, the steel cap of the boot catching Jack in the side and knocking him painfully back to the ground. He landed against the person on the ground—the policewoman, he realised, his "vision" had been accurate. She moaned, one arm moving weakly against him.

Another kick, this time landing squarely in Jack's stomach. He gasped and curled up, all the breath slammed out of him. Something hard and sharp-edged dug into his leg, a cold lump of metal. Through a haze of pain he looked up to see the man holding the knife, the impenetrable blackness of his hood still shielding his face.

The policewoman moaned again.

No, not a moan, she was trying to say something.

"Gun!"

In that instant, Jack realised what was digging into his leg. He'd landed on her gun. She must have dropped it when she was attacked, and now the only way to save them both was to snatch it up and fire, like *this*—

The flash from the gun lit up the man's face for a split second, an image that burned itself irrevocably into Jack's mind as the bullet hit his attacker on his left cheek just above the mouth, his features instantly obliterated by a red mist of blood and torn, shattered flesh and bone. The white of the snow was spattered with deep crimson. The impact snapped the man's head back, raising it to the dull yellow light from the fire escape. Jack could see a ragged hole, smashed teeth inside it at twisted angles, blood gushing from a ripped eye socket...

The knife dropped to the ground. A soft gurgling noise came from somewhere within the man's shredded mouth, then he toppled stiffly backwards, landing flat on his back with a dull thud.

Jack painfully lifted himself onto all fours, a burning sensation in his injured arm. He could see blood around the rent in his sleeve. Gasping for air, the impact of the kick still imprinted on his stomach muscles, he turned to see if the policewoman was okay.

"Drop the gun! Drop it! Drop that fucking gun *right now!*"

Jack dizzily looked back along the alley, the policeman he'd seen driving the car earlier now standing there, gun in his outstretched hands. It was aimed right at his face. He was almost surprised to discover that the gun was still in his hand. He released it.

The policeman rushed forward and kicked him, a blow to his shoulder this time, pushing him away from the policewoman. "Face down! Face down!"

Jack lowered himself onto his aching stomach, the policeman's foot slamming onto his back and pressing down hard. "Hands behind your back! *Now!*" He felt cold metal around his wrists, fastening painfully tight. Looking to the side, snow chilling his face, he saw the young policewoman looking back at him. Their eyes locked for a second, a strange feeling of *connection* passing between them.

Then the policeman's foot stamped down in the snow between them as he bent over her, blocking her from Jack's sight. "Amy! Oh Jesus, Amy! Talk to me!" He clutched at his radio, a crackle of static as he keyed it. "Officer down!"

TWO

The interview room at the 12th Precinct was cold, damp and smelled of old sweat and fear. Jack had no idea how many people were watching from the other side of the greasy two-way mirror on one wall of the green-painted room, but he suspected there might be a few angry policemen there keen to find out if he were the person who'd attacked an attractive young female cop... and have five minutes alone with him if he were.

There were two detectives in the room with him, but the person Jack was most concerned with was the woman's partner, whose name had turned out to be Beriev. Despite what Jack had repeatedly told him, he was convinced that it had been Jack who had attacked the policewoman, and it seemed that nothing he said was going to convince him otherwise.

If it hadn't been for the presence of the two detectives, Jack was sure that Beriev would have already given him a beating. Even with them there, he was being extremely aggressive. The detectives weren't encouraging him... but they weren't exactly holding him back, either.

"So you just *happened* to find a police officer's gun lying on the ground," Beriev sneered, hunched over the table like a bear and leaning close enough to Jack's face for him to smell his breath, "and you just *happened* to shoot the other guy square in the face while he was in the middle of beating the crap out of you?" He paused, leaned back slightly as he took a breath, then lunged forward, flecks of spit coming from his mouth as he yelled, "Bullshit!"

"It's the *truth*," insisted Jack, "for the fiftieth God-damn time! I saw this guy in the alley, thought he seemed like a psycho, walked away down the street, then... I heard the officer call for help and ran back." That was the only thing he'd told the police that was untrue. If he started talking about visions, he'd be locked up pending a shrink's examination for sure.

Beriev glared at him. "You heard her call for help."

"That's right."

"From two blocks away, you heard her call for help."

"I *wasn't* two blocks away," Jack protested. "I was just up the street."

"When we drove past you," Beriev said in a low, accusing voice, "you were already half a block down the street and heading away from the alley. That was a good five minutes before my partner was attacked. So, on a freezing cold night, in a blizzard, you just decided to hang around on the street where you'd just met a guy you thought was a psycho, for no reason whatsoever, for five whole minutes? You're full of it, Curtis." He suddenly banged his fist on the table, making Jack jump. "I want the *truth!*"

"Pete," said one of the detectives, Morris, in a warning tone. Beriev scowled, then took a couple of steps back.

"Curtis," said the other detective, Cohen, adjusting his glasses, "we've been taking statements from the people in the apartments near the scene. So far, nobody's said they heard Officer Tom call for help. They *did* hear the gunshot, though."

"Well, maybe you should ask *her* what happened," Jack snapped.

Beriev charged at him again, slamming both his fists down on the table and yelling right into Jack's face. "We *can't* ask her, you bastard, 'cause she's under sedation in hospital from when you cracked her head!"

Morris and Cohen both put their hands on Beriev's arms, pushing him back. "Pete!" said Cohen. "We let you in here as a favor. Don't make us ask you to leave, okay? Let us handle this." Beriev snorted in disgust, but moved away from the desk.

"What about this?" Jack asked, gesturing at the now-bandaged cut on his arm as best he could with both hands still in cuffs. "*I* got sliced up, *he* had the knife. What was he doing hanging around in an alley with a Rambo knife?"

"For all we know, he cut himself!" Beriev shot, pacing back and forth in front of the mirror.

Cohen shook his head. "It's a pretty deep cut, Pete." Beriev muttered something that Jack couldn't hear properly, but he got the gist.

"Look, whatever you think, I'm not some psycho, okay?" Jack said, sitting up straight. "If I hadn't come along when I did, she would have been dead, and that guy would have..." He remembered the flashes of other faces in his vision. Were they other people who he'd meant to kill? "He might have killed the person he was waiting for in the first place, as well," he finished, not wanting to give anything else away.

Morris gave Cohen a look. "Y'know... might be worth finding out who uses those garages. See if there's anybody who might have a connection to our John Doe."

"Or to this guy," Beriev added, pointing a thick finger at Jack.

"Or to this guy," Morris assured him. He picked up his paper cup of coffee from the top of a cabinet, sipped it, then wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Damn it, whoever said you can't taste cold coffee is a liar. What time is it?"

Cohen checked his watch. "Past one."

"Aw, jeez. So much for seeing Sheila..." Morris put down the cup and turned to face Jack. "Look. Some of your story seems believable—" Beriev made another snorting noise—"but like Officer Beriev here says, there are a couple of parts that don't add up. But to be honest there's not much else we can do to verify your side of things until we get a statement from Officer Tom, and the crime scene and pathology reports. None of which are gonna be until tomorrow. Now, it's late, it's cold, and I'm a reasonable guy. I'm guessing that you wouldn't say no to a roof over your head tonight."

"As a prisoner?" asked Jack.

"Consider it... protective custody," Cohen said, with a sidelong glance at Beriev. Beriev scowled.

"It's either that or we process you and send you to Riker's Island, and frankly that's way too much paperwork for this time of night," Morris told him, suppressing a yawn. "We can pick this up tomorrow. He's not going anywhere," he added, addressing the fuming Beriev. "Soon as Amy's awake and able to give a statement, we'll take it from there."

Cohen opened the door and leaned out, addressing somebody in the corridor outside. "Hey, can someone take this guy down to the

cells?"

"I'll take him," said Beriev, eyes flashing.

Morris put up a hand. "The hell you will, Pete." He dropped his voice, Jack straining to overhear. "Look, we all like Amy, but you're taking this way too far. She's your *partner*, not your daughter, okay? Take the rest of the night and cool off."

"Okay. Sure." Beriev's tone was reluctant. As another uniformed cop came in and the two detectives glanced round at the newcomer, he shot a look of hate at Jack.

"Take this guy down to the cells," Cohen told the cop. "And make sure he *doesn't* slip on the stairs or anything, huh? I want him just as he is now to pick up tomorrow."

"Got it," said the cop, sounding disappointed. Beriev's scowl deepened.

"I might swing by the hospital," he said, "check up on Amy."

"You do that," Cohen told him. He gestured for Jack to stand up. "Tomorrow morning, one way or the other, we'll sort this out."

The uniformed cop took Jack by the shoulder and directed him out of the room. As he passed Beriev, Jack glanced over at him. His expression hadn't changed.

"See you tomorrow," Beriev said menacingly, as the door closed behind Jack.

The cells were not exactly comfortable. But they were warm and dry, and, presumably because of the deterrent effect of the weather, deserted.

Without a watch, Jack wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but there was no way to tell anyway—the cells had no windows. His night had been far from restful anyway. His arm was still hurting, a throbbing ache coming from beneath the bandages, and the painful bruises where he'd been kicked only added to his discomfort. But it wasn't just the pain that had disturbed him during the night.

Over and over again, he kept seeing flashes from his vision, interspersed with the horrific sight of his attacker's bullet-shattered

face the moment before he died...

"Curtis! Jack Curtis!"

Jack sat up, confused. "What? Yeah, that's me."

A uniformed sergeant strode into the cell area, keys on his belt jingling. "They want you upstairs. Come on, let's move. This ain't the Hilton."

Jack almost smiled. "It is compared to what I'm used to," he said quietly. The sergeant unlocked the cell door and ushered him out. "No cuffs?"

"What, that a problem for you?"

"No, no. But—well, I thought I was going to be questioned some more."

The sergeant shut the cell door again, metal scraping against the concrete floor. "You are, far as I know."

"So am I still under arrest, or what?"

The sergeant shrugged as he pushed at Jack's shoulder. "Hell if I know, I just work here. Come on. Detective Cohen's waiting upstairs."

He guided Jack up the stairs and through the precinct building. A couple of the cops shot suspicious looks at him, but there was none of the open hostility that he'd experienced the night before.

At least, not until he reached the interview room. Beriev was leaning in a corner, the scowl still on his face as if it had never left all night. Detective Cohen was sitting at the table in the center of the room; his partner, Morris, was nowhere to be seen. Cohen gestured for Jack to sit down opposite him, then turned his attention back to a notebook. Jack pulled out the chair, which rasped over the grimy linoleum, one of the rubber caps at the bottom of its legs missing. He sat down and waited in silence for several long moments. Cohen was still engrossed in his notebook.

"So..." Jack finally said, "you gonna ask me something, or..."

Cohen looked up from his notes. "Mr Curtis," he began. *Mister* Curtis this morning, Jack realized. "We just want you to go through your version of events one more time, to make sure we haven't missed anything. See if you might have forgotten any details."

"I told you everything last night," said Jack.

"Yeah, right," Beriev muttered. Cohen gave him an annoyed look, the meaning of which was immediately clear to Jack. *Shut the hell up, Beriev.* Jack's mood instantly improved. Something had obviously come along that substantiated his story.

Cohen adjusted his glasses. "We just want to be sure... So, the first time you went into the alley..."

"The first time I went in, I was trying to find somewhere out of the cold to sleep for the night," Jack began almost by rote, annoyed at having to repeat the same story for the God-knew-how-many-th time. "This guy was hanging around by the dumpsters. He said something crazy, I decided I didn't want to hang around, so I went back onto the street."

Cohen flicked through his notes. "I don't really have anything from your interview last night about what he said. Can you remember *exactly* what he said to you?"

Jack tried to remember. "Something about... purifying the city. The senses of the city, that was it. And something about somebody's eye, but I don't remember who. Might have been Armen, or something. Some weird name. I don't know."

Cohen nodded, then added a line to his notes. "Okay. And then after leaving the alley..."

"I went up the street a bit, not sure how long for, there was something on a TV in a shop window about a nightclub fire, and then I heard the cop—"

"Officer Tom," Beriev growled.

"—Officer Tom call for help, so I ran back and found the guy standing over her with a knife. I tackled him, we had a fight, he knocked me down and stabbed me in the arm, then I found her, I mean *Officer Tom's* gun," Jack flicked a glance at Beriev, "on the floor and... shot him."

"A good shot for a wounded man," Cohen observed mildly, but with meaning in his voice.

"I used to shoot with my dad when I was a kid. Besides, he was only a few feet away." He looked over at Beriev. "Nearer than where he is now. Not exactly a hard target." Beriev seemed irritated at being

used as a comparison for target practice and not being able to answer back, which gave Jack a small feeling of satisfaction.

"And then?"

"And then your guy here charges in, points his gun at *me*, kicks me to the ground and cuffs me."

"Forgivable under the circumstances," said Cohen, closing his notebook. "Okay, Mr Curtis. You're free to go." Beriev made an angry noise deep in his throat, but stopped at Cohen's glare.

"That's it?" Jack asked, a little surprised.

"That's it."

"So what changed since last night?"

Cohen pointed at a pair of folders on the desk next to his notebook. "Crime scene report, and witness statements. Item one: two people coming out of a coffee house across the street saw you run into the alley, just before Officer Beriev came out of the shop, so the other man was clearly already in the alley with Officer Tom. Item two: the crime scene investigators found footprints in the snow that showed the dead man had been walking around in the alley for some time, probably trying to keep warm. And item three," he smiled very slightly, not enough for Beriev to see from across the room, "Officer Tom's own statement says that she was attacked by the dead man, and you ran up and knocked him down just as he was about to stab her."

Jack looked at him. "You know, you could have just started with item three."

"I like to be thorough," Cohen said, collecting the folders and his notebook into a pile. "But anyway, like I said, you're free to go." He waved a hand at the door of the interview room. Jack looked round at it, waited uncertainly for a moment, then stood up and moved to the door.

"Oh, just one more thing..." Jack turned back at Cohen's sudden vocal transformation into Columbo. "I always wanted to say that," Cohen grinned. "But actually, there is one more thing. We canvassed the neighborhood to get statements from people in the apartments near the alley. A lot of people heard the shot, but nobody heard Officer Tom call for help. Except you." Again, he had a glint of steel

in his otherwise amiable look. "Any reason you can think of why that is?"

Were they trying to entrap him somehow, trick him into telling them something incriminating?

Whatever—there wasn't anything he might say that could do that, for the simple reason that he'd done nothing wrong, and he wasn't going to change his story now that he was being set free. "Nothing I can think of," he said finally. "Maybe I've just got good hearing."

"Maybe," echoed Cohen. "You know, Officer Tom doesn't actually remember calling for help. But maybe she was just... groggy from being hit?"

"Maybe," said Jack. He and Cohen stared at each other. It was the detective who looked away first.

"Anyway, we're done here," he said. "I would normally ask for a contact address in case we have any more questions, but given your circumstances..."

"I'm sure I'll be around," Jack told him as he opened the door. "It's not like I've got anywhere else to go."

"Amy! You're okay!"

Amy turned her head a little too fast, giving her an unwelcome spike of pain, to see Bill DiMaggio, the desk sergeant, waving at her as she walked through the door of the precinct. A group of other cops closed in around her, smiling and asking her excited questions. She gave them the "I'm fine, no problems, ready to get back to work" answers she'd been rehearsing ever since she left the hospital. Her doctor had been decidedly wary of letting her go, wanting her to stay for another day for more tests, but Amy couldn't wait to leave. She knew the symptoms of a concussion, and she didn't have any.

Well, except for the damn headache.

"Come on everyone, back to work," said DiMaggio. "This ain't a party." Patting her on the arms and shoulders and still offering her goodwill as they walked off, the cops dispersed. DiMaggio waddled out from behind his desk and joined the others. "Jesus, Amy, it's

good to see you. Everyone's been worried. Weren't expecting you back here so soon, though."

"You know me, sarge. I hate sitting around." She peered past the small crowd of cops, searching the room. "Where's Pete?"

"Upstairs," said DiMaggio, his gaze flicking in the direction of the staircase that led up to the detective division. "I think he's, ah... kind of pissed that his suspect turned out to be your Good Samaritan. Plus..." He lowered his voice. "He's kinda beating himself up 'cause of the way he left you alone while he went to the crapper."

"Jeez. Really?" Amy shook her head, remembering too late that was a bad idea as another jab of pain rolled through her skull. She was going to have to get some stronger painkillers. "He *didn't* leave me alone. Hell, if I hadn't looked around at that exact second, I wouldn't even have seen the guy in the alley in the first place. It was just bad luck, that's all."

"Well, you know Pete," said DiMaggio. "He's got kind of overprotective of you in his old age."

"I'll go find him, remind him that I don't need it," Amy grinned. "So, when can I get back to work?"

DiMaggio's slight but unmistakable change of expression told Amy that she wasn't going to like what he had to say. "Well, now... The thing is, you were admitted to hospital with a concussion, and according to the doctor you were displaying definite symptoms last night."

"But I feel fine now!" Amy protested.

"I'm sure you are, but you know doctors..." DiMaggio shifted his weight uncomfortably. "And you know department policy. You get diagnosed with a concussion, you're on mandatory medical leave for at least two days until they give you the all clear."

"What?" Amy gasped. "Oh, for Christ's sake! I got a little bump on the head, that's all! It's not like I got whacked with a crowbar!"

DiMaggio shrugged helplessly. "It's the rules, Amy. Can't have people on the streets if there's a risk that they might not be fit for it. You need to get a check-up before you can come back on active duty."

"Aww..." Amy slapped her hands against her legs in frustration. "Man! I can't believe this!"

DiMaggio straightened, putting his large hands on her shoulders. "There's another thing too, Amy. This is the first time you've been in serious trouble while on duty, right? You might want to take a couple of days to... think about things, you know?" He glanced around as if to make sure nobody was listening in, then leaned a little closer and dropped his voice. "Trying to hide in your work won't help. Believe me, I know. It's something every cop has to go through... but it's amazing how few of 'em actually admit it. Trust me on this one, okay?"

"Okay," Amy said, not meeting his gaze. "I'll be back at work as soon as I can, you know."

"Hell, I know that!" DiMaggio crowed, Amy looking back up at him again to see his face crack into a huge smile. "Never doubted it for a second. You're one of the most determined girls I've ever known on the force."

"Y'know, according to that gender sensitivity seminar, you shouldn't be calling female officers 'girls'," Amy told him, unable to stop a smile creeping onto her own face.

"Well, if you don't tell anyone, I won't," DiMaggio chuckled. "Listen, you go find Pete and tell him you're okay, I know it'll put his mind at rest. When you come back, I'll go through all the paperwork and crap you'll need to know about this check-up." He headed back to his desk.

"Where is he?" Amy asked.

"Interview two, I think. He's with detective Cohen. Oh, and I think Morris was wanting to ask you a couple of things—he's up there too."

"Okay," said Amy, starting for the stairs.

Even through the closed door, Jack could hear Beriev erupt, yelling at Cohen and getting a calm but equally forceful answer. Both men's words were muffled, but Jack could guess what they were about. Beriev clearly thought there was more to Jack's story than he was letting on, and was mightily pissed off that all the evidence showed that he was innocent.

But, unless he was unlucky enough to run into Beriev again on the streets, it didn't really matter any more. He made a mental note to find out exactly which part of Manhattan was covered by the 12th Precinct so that he could try to stay away from it in future.

It wasn't the first time a cop had taken a dislike to him—not that cops had much liking for the homeless in general—but none of them had ever responded to him with Beriev's vehemence. From the way he was acting, it was almost as though the policewoman *had* been his daughter rather than his partner.

Or lover, maybe. But he had to admit he couldn't really see *that* happening. She was way out of his league.

Anyway, all that was behind him now. He glanced around to get his bearings, then set off in the direction of the nearest exit sign. Turning a corner, he found detective Morris standing in the corridor ahead of him, talking to a young woman. It took a second for Jack to recognize her as the policewoman he'd saved the night before, Officer Tom. Without her bulky coat and belt laden with equipment, she looked much smaller, more vulnerable.

Morris looked round as he approached, and nodded. "Mr Curtis."

"Detective," Jack answered. Officer Tom turned, revealing that she had a bandage covering one temple and bruises on her neck.

"This is the officer you helped last night, Amy Tom. Amy, this is Jack Curtis... your white knight, so to speak."

"Hi," said Amy, managing a smile even through her pounding headache. She offered her hand to Jack, who paused briefly, looking slightly embarrassed, before shaking it. As he released his grip, she noticed just how grubby his fingers were.

"Sorry," he said.

She smiled again. "That's okay. Considering that I owe you my life..."

Cohen leaned round the corner of the corridor, calling for Morris. "I'll talk to you later," he said to Amy as he walked away, leaving her alone with Jack.

She looked at the tear in the sleeve of his coat, which was still stained with dried blood. "How badly were you hurt?"

"I'm not really sure," Jack said, cautiously flexing his arm. In all honesty, he hadn't had much time to think about it this morning. There was a dull, throbbing ache as his muscles moved, with a somewhat sharper pain just under the bandages. "I don't think it's too bad," he lied. Amy cocked her head slightly, clearly understanding that he was hiding what he was feeling.

"Do you need any painkillers?" she asked in a faintly mothering tone. Jack smiled and nodded. "Have these," she told him, reaching into a pocket and handing him a packet of pills. "I need to get some stronger ones, anyway. These are hopeless."

Jack thanked her and pocketed the pills. "How bad were *you* hurt?" he asked. "They told me you were in hospital..."

Amy pointed at her bandage. "Bang on the head, couple of stitches, some cuts and bruises. Nothing serious. *I* reckon, anyway," she spat with sudden force. "The doctors think different, of course, so I'm on forced medical leave until they're sure my brains aren't going to leak out of my ears, or something.

"Better to be safe though," Jack said. "Isn't it?" From her expression, she didn't seem to agree.

"I guess," she admitted reluctantly, looking down at the floor. "But... I'd rather get straight back on the job, y'know? I want to keep busy, not just sit around thinking about... stuff." Her gaze flicked back up to Jack, a spark of curiosity in her dark eyes. "Which reminds me, speaking of thinking about stuff... How *did* you know I was in trouble?"

Jack shuffled his feet, feeling uncomfortable. Not telling the other cops about his bizarre, disturbing "vision" was one thing, but faced with one of the people who had featured in it... "I heard you calling for help," he said, deciding to stick with his story for the time being, "so I ran back down the street and found the guy standing over you with a knife."

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, that's what they told me you said when they were taking my statement at the hospital this morning. Funny thing is, I don't remember saying anything at all, never mind shouting for help. The guy jumped on me from above, knocked the wind right out of me." She locked eyes with Jack, just as he had done

with Cohen in the interview room. This time, it was Jack who looked away first. "Don't think I could have shouted for help if I'd tried."

"Well, I definitely heard something," he offered lamely.

Amy kept on looking at him, trying to judge his feelings, eventually shrugging and taking a step back. "Whatever. But, you know, as far as I'm concerned you could really have been Superman flying over the city when you came to help me, and this," she waved a hand at his dirty layers of clothing, "is your secret identity. I've made my statement. I'm not going to go back and change it, or tell anyone. I'm just really grateful that you *did* come and help me." He looked conflicted, and also even more embarrassed than when they'd shaken hands. He definitely had something that he was keeping to himself, Amy knew; she wondered what it could be.

She smiled at him again, which increased his look of conflicting emotions, and laughed inwardly. There were some things a cute smile could do that hours of interrogation couldn't achieve.

Jack struggled with his feelings. On the one hand, he felt that she deserved to know the truth; on the other...

"The thing is..." he eventually said, each word creeping reluctantly out of his mouth, "Well, the thing is that you'll probably think I'm crazy."

"This is New York," Amy said with a grin. "I'm used to crazy people."

"Hmm." He looked around to see if they had any eavesdroppers. "This is... off the record, right?"

"I'm not on duty right now. Or for the next couple of days," she added, a bitter edge in her words that she quickly got back under control. "Go ahead."

"Okay. Well. The thing is..." Jack took a deep breath. "I had a vision."

Amy raised both eyebrows. "A vision?"

"Yeah." He saw her expression. "I *knew* you'd think I was crazy!"

"No, no, go on," Amy told him, in her best "humor the crazy person" voice. "Have you had any visions before?"

"Of course I haven't," he snapped. "I'm not some maniac who takes his orders from the Eye of Artemis. Oh!" It suddenly came back to

him. "'Artemis,' that was it! That's what the guy said to me."

"Artemis?"

"The guy in the alley, when I met him earlier on, he was ranting on about 'the Eye of Artemis' and 'purifying the city's senses,' whatever that means. Hey, *he* was the crazy one, not me," Jack insisted when he noticed that Amy was giving him a dubious look. "Suppose I ought to go back and tell the detectives."

"I'll tell them," Amy said. This was new information, and it gave her a bit of an uneasy chill. Being attacked was bad enough in itself, but finding that she'd narrowly escaped death by a full-blown psycho... "I wanted to talk to them anyway. But this vision of yours..."

"You won't tell them about *that*, will you?" asked Jack warily.

"I give you my word," Amy said, meaning it. "What happened in it?"

Jack tried to remember. The details had become hazy overnight, and some of them he didn't *want* to recall anyway. "I saw... there was the crazy guy, and the moon—"

"Artemis is the Greek goddess of the moon," Amy noted, almost to herself.

"Yeah? Anyway, I saw the alley, and you... being attacked," he said, deciding that Amy probably didn't want to hear the exact details of what he'd seen happen to her in his vision. "There was a whole bunch of other stuff as well. Some of it was pretty sick."

"In what way?"

"People being cut up."

"What people?" Amy asked, as much demanding information as curious.

Jack closed his eyes, trying to bring the memories into focus. "I don't know," he was forced to admit. "Men and women—the first one after you was a woman, something about her eyes. But... I don't know, it was just all these weird flashes. I don't know what they meant, if they even meant anything." He opened his eyes again. "Anyway, it doesn't really matter any more, does it? You're okay, the guy's dead, so even if what I saw was what he was planning to do, it's not like he can do it any more, is it?"

"I guess not," Amy said. There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

"You still think I'm crazy, don't you?" Jack finally asked.

"You know something?" she told him. "I really don't care. All I care about is that I'm glad to be alive, and I have you to thank for that. So..." She looked him up and down again. "If there's anything you need, anything at all, just ask. You've got it."

"I'm, uh... fine, thanks," Jack said, feeling awkward.

"No, really," Amy reached into her jacket for her purse. "You need money?"

"No!" Jack insisted. Amy looked at him in surprise. "No, really," he said, more quietly. "I don't want handouts."

"Okay..." Amy said slowly. "But there must be something I can do for you. Do you have anywhere to stay tonight?"

"I was going to see if I can find a homeless shelter, try to meet up with a friend of mine."

Amy thought for a moment. "Look, I'll tell you what. You don't want handouts, fine, I can accept that. But I still want to do something to help you. You know the shelter over on Seventh?"

"The one near the park? Tried to get in a few times," Jack said. "It's always full."

"I know one of the supervisors," Amy told him. "I can give him a call, make sure that you get a place to stay for as long as you need. When you get there, just tell them I sent you."

Jack tried to hold his delight down to a non-embarrassing level. "Really? That's great! Thanks!"

"It's the least I can do," Amy said. "I mean, seriously. I'd do a lot more if you'd let me!"

"No, that's all I need. But thanks anyway."

"You want me to give you a ride over there?"

Amy asked. "If you want to wait around until I'm done here, I can drive you."

"That's okay. I've been hanging around this place way too long already," Jack said, indicating the building around him. "I'll walk."

"Sure?" Jack nodded. "Well, okay... But whatever happens, anyway, I really hope that things turn around for you."

"Thanks." They walked around each other, Jack heading for the exit as Amy started for the interview room. At the same moment,

they looked back at each other. They smiled at the odd shared moment.

"See you around, Mr Curtis."

"Jack. See *you* around, Officer Tom."

"Amy. And thank you again." They both grinned, waved again, and walked away.

Out on the street, Jack blinked at the brightness of the morning. There were still a few clouds, but otherwise the sky was a deep, crisp blue, winter sun giving a sharpness to the buildings around him.

Of course, the clearness of the sky also meant it was freezing. Blowing onto his hands to warm them before thrusting them deep into his pockets, Jack turned and began his walk in the direction of the Seventh Street shelter.

THREE

Chelsea Cox threw the newspaper down theatrically onto the desk, then glared at the frozen image on the monitor with jealous annoyance. On the screen, Ted Roxbury gazed vacantly back at her. It wasn't so much Roxbury himself causing her annoyance—though he didn't possess even a tenth of her talent and had no real qualifications for his job other than a blandly handsome face and good hair—but rather what she could see past the line of yellow police tape behind him.

"Can you believe it?" she asked rhetorically, turning to the other two people in the small, glass-walled office. George the producer and Brad the cameraman both shook their heads in unison. "Some guy gets shot in the alley right next to *my* building, and I get scooped by a worthless asshole like Roxbury? Jesus! How fucking unlucky am I?"

"Not as unlucky as the guy who got shot," Brad said laconically. Chelsea shot him an irritated look. He might be an adequate cameraman, but Brad's constant back-talking was getting on her nerves. If he didn't start treating her with the respect that she deserved, she was going to have to replace him.

"On the plus side," said George, fiddling with the remote for the VCR, "the overnights were good for your coverage of that nightclub fire."

"How good?" Chelsea demanded.

"Second in the ratings overall for the night."

"Only second? Shit! I freeze my ass off and we only came second?"

"You coulda stayed warm if you'd moved nearer the fire," said Brad. Chelsea ignored him.

"We cut to the live reports during a weak show," George pointed out, trying to placate her. "Hardly anyone was watching it anyway. Things picked up on the late-nights when we showed the full story. We got some good burning building shots in the previews—that always helps bring in the viewers."

Chelsea turned on him. "Oh, what, so things picked up just 'cause Brad here pointed his camera at some flames? What about me? Did I

not make a difference, or could we just have sent some damn intern out into the cold?" Brad said something under his breath, which Chelsea doubted was complimentary, but she ignored him again. He wasn't the one with the awards, after all.

George put on his best keep-her-happy smile. "Of *course* you made a difference, Chelsea. Big juicy story like that which everybody's going to cover, you know I'm always gonna put our secret weapon onto it, right?"

"You are so full of shit, George," Chelsea told him, sitting down and fixing him with her gaze. He looked worried. She let him stew for a few moments before smiling, slightly. "But keep it up, I enjoy it." She tapped at the report in the newspaper, which had given her far more information about the shooting in just a couple of paragraphs than Roxbury's entire report. "Right by my damn apartment... You know I couldn't park my car when I got home? They'd cordoned off the whole alley so I couldn't get to my garage! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a parking spot on that street?"

"Yeah, I hate it when I get inconvenienced by someone getting killed," said Brad. Chelsea decided at that moment that he was history. Today was going to be the last day they'd work together.

"Anyway," George said, pushing a button on the remote and stopping the tape, Roxbury vanishing in a flicker of static, "we need to get cracking on tonight's stories." He adopted his sycophantic smile again. "Now, what are we going to find that's worthy of New York City's most popular television reporter with males ages eighteen to thirty?"

"Eighteen to thirty-*five*," she corrected. "Jesus, George, if you're going to kiss my ass, at least get your facts right."

George laughed uncomfortably as he opened the door of the office, the low buzz of noise from the dozen or so televisions around the room constantly tuned to rival stations wafting into the soundproofed booth. At this time of the morning the news room was relatively quiet, the staffers still trawling through the morning papers in the hope of finding some obscure snippet of news that could be expanded into a full-blown story. "All right, people!" he called,

stepping into the news room. "What have we got going on right now?"

People around the room called out various developing stories, none of which struck Chelsea as particularly interesting or worthy of her time. The problem was that she was going to have to take one of them before too long, just to make sure that she got to appear in the day's bulletins. Exposure was everything, but even then there were different kinds of exposure. Losers like Vaughn Henderson, absently stirring his coffee at his desk without any sign of cognitive activity going on in his brain, could take all the cornball "human interest" stories they liked. It was the skateboarding ducks or parachuting grandmothers that stuck in the minds of the viewers, not the people reporting on them. But drama, accidents, violence, death—people remembered *them*, and also remembered the reporter who brought the horror into their homes. Add some glamour and sex appeal, and you had... well, Chelsea Cox.

And two awards by the age of twenty-five, she smugly reminded herself, which was two more than anyone else around here could say. Even if she'd eventually had to keep them at home instead of on display at the station. Some jealous bastards—of which she had a large number of suspects—had kept on vandalizing them with obscene Post-It notes.

Her attention was caught as one of the researchers, Dave somebody, hurried in from the side office where the police scanner was kept. Using the scanner to eavesdrop on emergency services radio messages was technically illegal, but the station had a whole group of lawyers ready to cry out about First Amendment rights on the off-chance that they were ever caught using it. And people running in from the room usually meant they'd overheard a worthwhile message. "Dave!" she said, cutting in over George as he asked for details on somebody's non-story. "What have you got?"

"Leaper on a roof," Dave said excitedly. "Down on Seventh. He's still up there—cops are on the way."

"How tall's the building?" asked Chelsea.

"Thirteen storeys." Somebody made a whistling noise, followed by a loud splat. A couple of people giggled.

"Unlucky for them, lucky for us," she said, calculating how long it would take to get there from the station given the time of day, traffic, weather, chance that the guy might jump before they actually arrived... "George, I'll take this one. There hasn't been a good leaper for a while. I'll need a satellite truck. If it looks like he's going to jump, we might want to cut to a live feed." She was already running through a list of possible, carefully-considered, spontaneous shocked phrases for just such an event in her head.

George nodded. Damn it, she was going to have to go with Brad as her cameraman after all. There wasn't time to check with the pool and see if anyone else was available. Oh well. He'd at least get a good story to finish on.

Snapping her fingers at Brad for him to follow, she grabbed her Prada coat from the rack and hurried for the door.

"Now, you're *absolutely* sure that you're okay?" Beriev asked.

"Aw, Pete!" Amy protested, though she was still somewhat pleased at being fussed over. "I'm totally fine! Just need to get rid of this headache and I'll be ready to come back to work. Once I have that damn check-up, anyway." She sipped her coffee and looked around the squad room to see if any more well-wishers were going to come over. It finally seemed as though the entire precinct had spoken to her.

"You still got it? Don't you got any painkillers?"

"I gave them to that guy Jack."

Beriev shot her a suspicious look. "What guy?"

"You know, Jack Curtis."

Beriev leaned back in his chair and made a face. "*That* guy. Y'know, I didn't trust that bum from the moment I saw him. There's something about him that just sets off my alarm bells up here..." He tapped at his forehead.

"Yeah," Amy said, "helping somebody out like that. The bastard!"

"I'm not kidding," Beriev said, looking offended at not being taken seriously. "You know he's got a record?"

"Yeah? For what?"

"Dunno, Cohen wouldn't tell me. But I think I might try and find out."

Amy sighed. "Jeez, Pete, give it a rest. The poor guy's already homeless. His life's bad enough as it is without you harassing him."

"I'm not *gonna* harass him!" Beriev protested. "I'm just gonna... keep an eye on him, that's all. He knows more than he was letting on. Maybe the dead guy was his buddy and Curtis got cold feet while they were waitin' around in the alley."

"Duh, that'd be the six inches of snow giving him the cold feet," Amy sniffed, tiring of Beriev's paranoia. For a moment she thought about telling him why Jack had come running back along the street, about his "vision" story, but decided not to. For one thing, she'd promised Jack she'd keep his secret; for another, she didn't want to hand Beriev another reason to keep him under close scrutiny.

"Hey, enough with the sarcasm. I'm just watching out for you here," said Beriev.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry." Amy finished her coffee and flicked the empty cup into a trash can. "Just don't get all bent out of shape about Jack, okay? I really, *really* don't think there's any reason to go all KGB on him."

One of Beriev's bushy eyebrows twitched. "Since when are you on first name terms with the guy?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Amy smiled. "We got engaged this morning." She watched Beriev's reaction. "God, you should have seen your face just then! Relax, Pete. You're the only man in my life right now."

"And ain't I the lucky guy?" Beriev smiled. He stood up. "You still want a ride home?"

Amy rose and checked her watch. "Yeah, thanks. Oh, we'll need to take a detour on the way. I need to find a pharmacy, get some more painkillers."

"Well, if you will keep giving 'em to every sad-ass hard luck case that comes along..."

"Every sad-ass hard luck case that saves my life," Amy reminded him. "Come on, let's get moving."

Despite the cold, Jack's mood continued to improve as he made his way across town. The sun was shining, the wind had dropped and he would actually have somewhere to stay for the night. He'd even decided to use one of his precious dollars to treat himself to a hot dog from a street vendor. It wasn't his usual fare, but what the hell. After last night, he deserved to celebrate, in however small and silly a way.

It also helped him keep his mind off the memory of the man dying, the image crystallized in the flash of light as the gun fired. A red, wet hole bursting open in his face, smashed teeth suddenly exposed within under the dim yellow glow of the lamp...

He shook his head, trying to will the thought away. If he hadn't done it, both he and the policewoman, Amy, would be dead now. However horrible the sight had been, he'd done the right thing. He'd saved her.

Not like...

He shook his head again, this time angrily. The sudden blur, the flash of red... No, that was another time, another place, a completely different situation. He didn't want to think about it.

And in one way, he realized as an odd thought struck him, some good had come of it. If the accident hadn't happened, he wouldn't have been in New York to save Amy's life in the first place. *There* was a strange twist of fate.

Cold water spattering off his shoulder jolted him out of his reverie. He flinched and ducked away from it. The sunlight on his side of the street was causing the ice and snow on the windowsills and ledges above to melt. No doubt it would refreeze as soon as the sun moved around and dropped them back into shadow, but he had enough problems without getting wet into the bargain. Being in the sun was a pleasant change, though. Should he stay on this side and take the chance of being dripped on by trickles of freezing water and lumps of ice, or cross over into the shade?

The hell with it, he was going to make the most of the winter sun. Although crossing the street would be easy enough: the traffic, he noticed, had come to a standstill.irate horns honked around him.

Ahead, he could see the flashing lights of a police car—no, two of them—and a crowd gathering, blocking the street. What was going on?

"Aw crap, what's going on here?" Beriev craned his neck, trying to see over the knot of traffic that had ground to a halt in front of them. Amy followed his gaze. She knew the traffic patterns for this part of the city quite well, and this wasn't normal for the time of day. Something was happening further along the street.

As if on cue, the radio came to life.

"A leaper?" said Beriev, listening to the report. "Christ, no wonder everyone's stopped. Damn rubbernecks'll be waiting for him to jump."

They weren't far from the scene. "We'd better go and help out, I guess," Amy said.

"I'd better go," Beriev corrected. "*You're* off duty, remember?"

"Come on, Pete," said Amy, "what am I supposed to do? Sit in the car until they bring him down?"

Beriev considered it for a moment. "Okay, come on. Just do me a favor—don't try to catch him, will you?"

Brad might be a sarcastic little bastard, Chelsea thought, but he was certainly a good driver. They hadn't even had to break any traffic laws to get here. Well, maybe a few had been *bent*, but it was Brad's license on the line, not hers.

He parked the truck on the sidewalk as close as they were able to get to the scene before the traffic came to a complete standstill. Chelsea left the technician to extend the transmitter tower and establish an uplink to the station while she and Brad jogged along the street to the scene. The cops had stopped the traffic and tried to keep the inevitable crowd back, but there was still quite a crush.

She took in the scene, trying to work out the best angles as she searched the skyline for the leaper. There he was! The building was a

nondescript dark brick tenement block, probably from the 1920s, and the potential suicide was out on the edge of the roof, standing on a narrow ornamental ledge above the top row of windows with his back against the parapet. "See him?" she asked Brad.

"Yeah, I got him." Brad was already readying his camera.

"See anyone else on the story?" Chelsea scanned the street for the tell-tale masts of any other news trucks. None were in sight.

"Nope. Looks like we're the first here."

"Great." They reached the edge of the crowd, Brad pushing ahead of Chelsea to clear her way while she switched on the charm to mollify anybody who objected to being shoved aside. "Excuse us, please. Coming through. Hi there," she said with a sultry smile when recognition flashed across somebody's face next to her.

A handful of cops were trying to keep the crowd back, hurrying back and forth in a rough semi-circle in front of the tenement, waving and yelling as people tried to push forward for a better look. One of them tried to wave Brad back, but stopped when Chelsea moved around him and treated him to her best *how-you-doin'* look. She'd already unfastened her coat so that she could show off her legs, which as always for work were shown off to their best advantage by stilettos and sheer pantyhose, and was gratified when the cop—mid-thirties, tending to overweight even though he probably went to the gym three times a week, hair thinning—gave them a surreptitious but clearly approving glance.

"Sorry, ma'am, you'll have to move back," said the cop.

"Hi!" Chelsea said brightly, ignoring his request. She nudged Brad to bring up his camera as she switched on her microphone, thrusting it toward the cop's face. "Chelsea Cox, WNYK news. Can you tell me what's going on, officer..."

"Uh, Philips," the cop answered, briefly looking down to check out Chelsea's legs again.

"Officer Philips, hi. On three, two... Officer Philips," she said, shifting quickly into all-business mode and, she could tell from his unsettled expression, catching the cop completely unawares, "can you tell me what the situation is?"

"We, uh, we received a call that there was a man on the roof," said Philips, something of a rabbit-in-headlights look on his face as his attention flicked awkwardly between Chelsea and the unblinking gaze of the camera, not sure which to address. "When we, ah, responded, we found what seems to be a homeless man in a state of some, uh, agitation on the roof. When we tried to get close to him, he, uh, climbed out onto the ledge and threatened to jump unless we backed off."

"And has he given a reason for wanting to jump?" Chelsea pressed. She glanced up to make sure the leaper was still there. Missing the fall while she was talking to some dim-bulb cop wouldn't do at all. The tiny figure was still right where he was supposed to be, out on the ledge.

"Uh, I dunno. There's a couple of guys up on the roof trying to talk him down right now."

"Officer Philips, thank you. And... clear. Keep rolling, though," she told Brad as she looked around. "Over there." She pointed to the opposite side of the street, where a flight of stone steps led up from the sidewalk into a building. "What do you think?"

"Good spot," said Brad. "I can get decent angles on the roof *and* the landing zone from there."

"Great. Officer Philips," she said silkily, turning back to the cop, "could you give us a little help?"

"I dunno, I..."

She flashed him a smile of the kind that she bet he'd never seen since getting married.

"Um, sure, I guess..."

Jack crossed the road and walked past a parked TV truck, its transmitter mast stretching into the sky like a mechanical giraffe, and joined the crowd. Everyone was looking up, so he followed suit and saw what they were gawping at; a man standing precariously on a ledge just below the edge of the roof, at least twelve storeys up.

Ghouls, he thought. Some poor bastard had reached the end of his tether, wanting to end it all, and people were gathering for the spectacle. He could even hear laughter from somewhere in the crowd, discussions of exactly what effect such a fall would have on a human body. Sickos.

He picked his way through the crowd, continuing along the street. A short way ahead, he saw a TV cameraman and a very attractive blonde woman hurry up a flight of steps, the man turning to point his camera back over the heads of the crowd while the woman took up position in front of the lens, one hand brushing at her hair. She looked familiar. It took Jack a moment to remember where he'd seen her before; she was the reporter who had been covering the fire the night before. Great. More exciting death for her morbid viewers. All of a sudden she looked a lot less attractive to Jack.

He shrugged and continued walking, looking over at the cops trying to keep the crowd under control.

Hey, wasn't that...?

"Jack?" Amy spotted a familiar, bearded face moving through the crowd along the sidewalk opposite the leaper's building. Beriev had left her at the edge of the crowd while he joined the other cops trying to move the crowd back. "Jack! Hey!"

"Damn it, I'm getting wet," Brad complained, pulling a baseball cap out of a pocket and putting it on. Water was trickling down from above and splashing over the top of the steps, too much to be simply snow melting on a window ledge. "Must be a burst pipe up there or something." He cautiously tipped his head, trying to look up without getting water in his face. "Lot of ice up there. Oh, shit." He raised the brim of his cap for a better look. "There's a load of phone cables up there. They might block the shot."

"Never mind that," said Chelsea, quickly checking her makeup in the mirror of her compact. She had to admit, she looked great. She

wasn't sure about the lighting, though. "Do I need a key light? Brad!"

"What?" Brad ran his hand over the top of the camera, which was spotted with water from the drips above. It was rainproofed to a certain extent, but he didn't want to run the risk of a short.

"Do I need a key light? I don't want to just be a big dark silhouette."

"You won't be," Brad assured her impatiently, looking through the viewfinder. "The sun's off to the side."

"It's behind me," Chelsea snapped, moving her hand back and forth in front of her face to prove her point. "Look, see? Shadows! I need a key light."

Brad grunted and ripped open one of the Velcro-sealed pockets of his jacket, fumbling inside before pulling out a spotlight, which he slid into place in a slot on top of the camera's casing. He flicked a switch to turn it on, illuminating Chelsea's face. "This'll eat up the batteries, y'know."

"Whatever. Give me the monitor, I want to see how I look."

Brad sighed and took a five-inch LCD monitor from another pocket, plugging it into a socket on the camera's side and handing it to her. "Happy now?"

"Hold on." Chelsea put a hand over the monitor to shade it, then peered intently at the image on the screen. The lighting wasn't perfect, but it would do, and she was quite well framed—if the guy jumped while she was talking to the camera, he would land right next to her eyeline. "It'll do." She put the monitor down on top of the wall of the steps. "The important thing is, do I look fuckable?" Brad muttered something under his breath. "What?"

"I said, I'd fuck you."

"In your dreams," Chelsea replied, knowing full well that there'd been no "I'd" in Brad's comment. Cheeky little bastard. Well, she'd see how cheeky he was after being reassigned to the skateboarding duck unit. "Light look okay?"

"They'll be able to see every gory detail," Brad assured her.

She turned her attention to the monitor. "Can you zoom in on Jumpy McSplatto up there?"

"What are you doing here?" Amy asked.

"I was on my way over to the shelter," said Jack, overhearing the reporter's "Jumpy McSplatto" comment and frowning up at her. "What about you?"

"Pete was driving me home. We got stuck in the traffic." She shielded her eyes and looked up at the roof of the building opposite. "God, I hope he doesn't jump. Doesn't matter how much they think they want to die, they always scream on the way down."

"You've seen these before?"

"Just the once," Amy said, with a slight involuntary shudder. "Once too many."

Jack was about to ask her how the police went about trying to talk potential leapers down when he caught a sudden movement in the corner of his eye. He whirled to face the building behind him, and saw a momentary reflection of something falling in the window next to the steps. For one awful moment he thought the man had jumped, a chill of fear running through him, but when he turned back there was no sign of anything. The crowd was still buzzing with anticipation rather than gasping in shock, and when he looked up he could still see the tiny, frightened shape of the man on the ledge.

"Jack?" Amy asked. "What's the matter?"

"I dunno, I..." He looked back at the window. "Nothing. I just thought I saw something falling."

Amy looked up at the building behind them. Icicles were hanging down from windowsills and phone lines. "Probably just ice or something."

"Probably," said Jack, unconvinced. Amy regarded him quizzically.

"Unless you think it was another... vision?"

Jack shook his head, wanting to dismiss the idea as quickly as he could. "No, no, you're right. It was probably just a lump of ice." Although when he looked back at the window again, there didn't seem to be *anything* reflected in it, not even the street opposite.

The reporter on the steps caught his attention. She was holding a small monitor, one hand over it to shade it from the sun, the image

bright enough for him to see. The cameraman was aiming his camera up at the sky, and on the screen, growing larger as the picture zoomed in, was the leaper. Jack started to get an odd, uneasy feeling as details of the clothes became clear, and then the man's face... "Oh my God."

"What?" Amy asked, turning to see what had caught his eye.

"I know him. Hey!" Jack shoved past the couple of people in his way and hurried up the steps. "Let me see that!"

"Hey!" yelled Chelsea, glaring in disdain at the obviously homeless man who had just appeared next to her, trying to look at her monitor. "The hell do you think you're doing?"

Amy followed Jack up the steps. "It's okay, it's okay, no trouble."

"Like hell there isn't!" Chelsea looked at Brad, who had pointed the camera back at her. "What the fuck are you grinning at? Stop filming and get rid of this guy!"

"I'm a police officer," Amy said, raising her voice, "and he's with me." Chelsea sneered, but calmed down. "Jack, what is it?"

The camera man had switched his attention back to the man on the roof. "It's Lonnie! I know him!"

"You know him?" Chelsea purred, instantly changing her dismissive expression to one of keen interest and signalling Brad to start recording again. "Sir, can I get your name?"

"What?" asked Jack, looking up from the monitor at her, confused.

"Your name! Please?"

"Jack Curtis. Jesus, I knew he was kind of depressed when he left me last night, but I'd no idea he was this bad..."

"Mr Curtis, can you tell us anything about the man on the roof?"

Jack looked back at the little monitor and realised that he was on camera. "What? No, I—stop filming!" He waved his hand in front of the camera, then turned to Amy. "Look, I know him, I might be able to talk to him. Can you get me up there?"

"I don't know, I can try. Come on." She took Jack's arm and led him through the crowd.

Brad's cellphone vibrated, the cameraman whipping it from a pocket and snapping it open with his free hand before the first buzz

had even stopped. "Yo. Yeah? Cool." He closed the phone again and put in his earpiece. "Uplink's ready."

"About time!" Chelsea said, connecting her own earpiece and switching it on. She winced at a momentary buzz, then heard George's voice coming from the studio. "George? Can you hear me?"

"I got you, Chelsea. How's the situation?"

"Nothing yet, the guy's still on the roof. But listen, there's a guy here, Jack Curtis, either homeless or really, *really* into the grunge look, says he knows the jumper. There's a cop with him, they're going to try and talk him down."

"You get a shot of him?"

"Of course," Chelsea snorted.

"Great. Be worth staying with him, he might turn out to be a hero. Or end up tipping the guy off the edge. Either way, he's worth talking to. You didn't piss him off, did you?"

"Who, me?"

"What the hell's *he* doing here?" Beriev demanded, stomping over to join Amy and Jack at the front of the crowd.

"He was on his way to a shelter. Listen, Pete," said Amy, talking quickly and occasionally flicking her eyes up to make sure the leaper was still on the roof, "Jack says he knows the guy up there. Says his name's Lonnie, he's homeless, and last night was depressed and talking about killing himself."

"Well, a thirteen story drop onto pavement's one way to do that," said Beriev. "So, what?"

"I might be able to talk him down," Jack said.

Beriev regarded him suspiciously. "We got two guys up there trying to that already. They're gettin' nowhere. Every time they get close, he leans out and threatens to jump until they back off. The guy sounds crazy."

"They don't know him," insisted Jack, "I do. He's not crazy, he's just... reached his breaking point. Look, at least give me a chance! Even if he doesn't want to talk to me, it'll still keep him occupied for

a few minutes so you can... I don't know, put out a net or whatever you do."

Beriev laughed. "A *net*? We're not the damn circus!" He looked up at the figure hanging off the side of the roof. "If this guy jumps, slips, whatever, his time's up—there's no way on God's Earth to stop it." He rubbed his moustache, thinking. "But..." With clear reluctance, he nodded at Jack. "Okay. I'll take you up there. You got one try to talk him back off that ledge."

Jack looked up at Lonnie again. "That's all I ask."

"Okay then, let's go." They set off for the door of the building, Beriev stopping after a few steps and turning to Amy. "Where do you think you're going?"

"With you," Amy said, confused.

"You know the guy on the roof?"

"No."

"You on duty?"

"No, but—"

"Then sorry, Amy, but you got to stay down here."

"*What?*"

"Hey, Philips!" Beriev called. "Keep an eye on Amy for me, will you?"

"*Pete!*"

"Hey, Amy," said Philips, ambling over. "How you doing? I heard you got hit on the head last night."

"I'm doing just fine," Amy grumbled, watching in annoyance as Beriev and Jack disappeared inside the tenement. She tilted her head back to look at the roof again. The man, Lonnie, was thankfully still up there, but Beriev was right. If he fell, there wouldn't be any way to save him...

"Well, that's a development," Chelsea commented as the two men, Curtis and a beefy cop with a rather ugly moustache, entered the building. "Will you be able to see him when he gets onto the roof?"

"Depends how far he leans over," Brad said, zooming in on the roof again. Chelsea leaned down to look at the monitor.

"Let's hope he's a really close friend and tries to grab him. Where's his cop girlfriend?"

Brad turned his camera back onto the crowd. "Talking to that cop you flashed your legs at."

"See if you can wave her back over. She might be able to give us some background."

"She's kind of cute, too."

"Cute?" spat Chelsea. "Leave the cute for kittens and puppies." She checked her makeup again, then turned back to watch the rooftop.

Thirteen storeys up, Manhattan was noticeably quieter than down on the street. Jack could still hear car horns below, but the constant rumble of street noise had faded, giving them an odd, distant quality.

Just as Beriev had said, there were two other cops on the roof on the tenement building, but they were keeping well back from the edge, standing near the entrance to the stairs. Looking past them, Jack could see Lonnie, or at least his top half, his back to them. His lower body was hidden behind the parapet.

"Hey, Pete. Who's this?" asked one of the cops with a dubious look at Jack as he and Beriev walked over to join them.

"Reckons he knows our guy over there," Beriev told them. Jack wasn't the least bit surprised that he didn't bother to tell the cops his name, or mention the small fact that he was also the person who'd saved his partner's life the night before. "Thinks he might be able to talk him down. What's he like at the moment?"

"Seems to have quietened down at the moment," said the cop. "Problem is, every time we try to get close he sets off again."

"What kind of things has he been saying?" Jack asked. Both cops looked at him as if waiting for Beriev's permission before deigning to reply. Beriev nodded slightly.

"Crying, mostly," said the second cop, speaking for the first time. "Lot of stuff about how he can't take any more, how he's got nothing

to live for. Not very coherent, it usually turns into a screaming rant after a minute or so. I don't think he really cares whether we can make out what he's saying or not, he just wants to get it off his chest."

Beriev regarded Lonnie for a long moment. "You think he's serious about jumping, or he just wants attention?"

"Hard to tell," said the first cop. "There's been a few times when he's let go of the roof completely—puff of wind is all it'd take to send him over."

"Good job it's not windy, I guess," Beriev said, still watching Lonnie. "Okay then, Curtis. See if you can get through to him."

Jack took a deep breath, then walked slowly across the roof.

Amy wasn't quite sure how she'd got suckered into it, but she was now standing on the edge of the top step with a microphone jammed into her face and telling that over-made-up harpy Chelsea Cox everything she knew about Jack. Whatever the blonde's power of persuasion was based on, she was very adept at it.

"A real-life hero despite being homeless," gushed Chelsea, turning to face the camera and at the same time subtly moving across to push Amy towards the edge of the frame, "who follows up saving the life of a police officer one day by attempting to talk a potential suicide down from the roof of a tall building the next. An inspiration to us all. We'll bring you more on this story as it develops. This is Chelsea Cox for WNYK news." She gave the camera her trademark sign-off look, a hint of a pout and a suggestive narrowing of the eyes as she tipped her head slightly, held the pose for a few moments, then clicked her fingers. "And clear. George, you get that?"

"Got it," said George though her earpiece.

"Think you might use it?"

"We could drop it in as a breaking story during the next commercial break—if they guy's still up on the roof, that is."

"Yeah, I know it's not much, but you can cut in some footage of the leaper as well." Chelsea turned and blinked in surprise as she

realised Amy was still standing next to her. "Oh, sorry. We're done now, thanks." She turned back to Brad.

"I, uh... oh." Amy felt oddly disappointed at being dismissed so suddenly, and even a little embarrassed about the fact she was still standing there like a dummy. A sudden change in the noise from the crowd made her turn.

"Hey, he's moving," said Brad, quickly aiming the camera skyward.

"Get back! Get back! I warned you, don't come any closer or I'll jump, I'll do it, I'll really do it!"

"Lonnie?" Jack called, cautiously. "Lonnie, it's me."

Lonnie stopped twitching, peering warily back over his shoulder. "Jack?" he asked in a slightly less agitated voice.

"Yeah, it's me."

"What do you want?"

Jack took another couple of careful steps, then came to a stop about six feet from the ice-covered parapet, his hands held up to show Lonnie he wasn't trying to grab him. "I was... I was kind of hoping to get you back onto this roof."

"Don't waste your time, Jack," said Lonnie, starting to twitch again. "I told you last night! I just can't take any more of this, I just can't..." His voice tailed off and he closed his eyes, slowly lowering his head. Jack thought he saw the bead of a tear grow in the corner of his eye. "I went to the shelter last night after I left you, Jack. It was full. So I went to another one. It was full too. And another, and another. You know where I slept last night, Jack?" He opened his eyes again, the tear breaking free and rushing down his cheek. "A kennel. A God-damn kennel! I slept inside a busted-up old doghouse that somebody had put out with the garbage!" His voice cracked as he started to shake, sobbing. "I had to sleep somewhere that people didn't even think was fit for an animal!"

"Lonnie," said Jack, very carefully moving a step closer to him, "listen to me. I know things are pretty bad, but that's no reason to just give up. There's always a chance, there's always hope."

"No, no, you're wrong," Lonnie said, taking one hand off the edge of the parapet to wipe his eyes. Jack winced, freezing in place. "There's no point. This is it, Jack, this is the bottom. There's nowhere else I can go."

"Except up."

"You really believe that?" Lonnie asked, looking over his shoulder at Jack again. "Look at me! Look at what I've turned into—what I'm doin' right now! No, there is no chance, there is no hope. Not for me, anyway. If all that I've got to look forward to for the rest of my life is more of the same *shit*," he suddenly yelled the word, "that I've had for the last few years, then... then what's the fuckin' point?" He looked away, staring out across the city.

Jack took the opportunity to move another small step closer to him.

"I can see him," Brad suddenly announced. Chelsea and Amy both looked at the monitor. Even at the sharp angle from which they were looking up at the roof, Jack's head was now visible above its edge. That meant he must only be a couple of feet from Lonnie, Amy realized.

"Keep the camera on him," Chelsea ordered. "George, you watching this?"

"I'm not even blinking," the reply crackled through her earpiece.

"Ready to go live if we need to?"

"My finger's on the button."

Jack could now see enough of the street below to give him a slight feeling of vertigo. He had no idea whether Lonnie was prone to it or not, but he was close enough to see that even in the cold, his friend was sweating.

"A cop told me something this morning," he said, trying to keep his voice as level as possible. "She said that even if people really do mean

to kill themselves by jumping, they always scream on the way down. The second they do it, they regret it."

Lonnie said nothing, but Jack could tell by his expression that he was listening.

"It's no way to go out," Jack continued. "Screaming in terror because you realize you've just made the worst mistake of your life and there's nothing you can do to change it." He hoped he wasn't overdoing it, but he was running out of options.

"I've made other mistakes," Lonnie sobbed.

"But there's still a chance you might be able to do something to fix them! I mean, come on, look at how much you helped me. I wouldn't have survived my first couple of months on the streets if I hadn't met you, if you hadn't told me how to keep going. Lonnie, please, let me help you." He made a deliberate move forward, now only one step away from being able to reach out and touch Lonnie. Or grab him.

"Jesus, he's almost there," said Brad, barely breathing.

Chelsea put down the monitor and moved back in front of the camera. Whatever happened, it was going to take place in the next few seconds, and she wanted to be ready.

"Get back on the roof," Jack begged.

"What about them?" Lonnie asked, shooting a look in the direction of the cops. "What'll they do to me?"

"I don't know. They'll probably arrest you, but—" he quickly continued, seeing fear cross Lonnie's face, "believe me, a night in a cell's not so bad. I was in one last night."

"What did you do?" Lonnie asked through his tears.

"I'll tell you... if you get back on the roof. Here." He held out his hand.

Amy tensed, one hand to her mouth. She didn't have to watch the monitor now to see Jack reaching out for Lonnie.

Slowly, shakily, Lonnie took one hand off the parapet... and reached back over it, his trembling fingers touching Jack's.

Jack closed his grip. The two men looked at each other for a moment. Lonnie managed to smile for the first time in days.

"He's got him!" Brad gasped.

Chelsea frowned. A leaper being talked down from a roof as opposed to jumping from it was a third or fourth story, at best.

"Okay, Lonnie," said Jack, "now, really slowly, really carefully, turn around. I've got you. Just turn around and let me pull you back up."

From nowhere, a cold wind sprang up. It wasn't like a normal wind, Jack thought, a continuous force of moving air; this somehow felt more like a snake circling around them, looking for the place to strike...

Lonnie shifted slightly as the wind hit him, one foot on the ledge, the other raised just above it as he prepared to turn around.

Ice cracked under his toes.

Lonnie's foot shot out from the ledge, his unsupported weight instantly dragging Jack forward and slamming him hard against the unforgiving brick of the parapet. Pain ripped across his chest.

But he still had Lonnie's hand—

"Whoa!" Chelsea gasped. Even anticipating the fall hadn't prepared her for it.

But the man wasn't falling, not just yet...

"Help me!" Jack screamed over his shoulder at the cops, as Lonnie kicked and thrashed in panic on the other side of the parapet. "Help!"

He could hear them charging across the roof, but he couldn't keep his grip. Lonnie's fingers were slipping...

Amy made an indistinct sound of horror somewhere deep in her throat as the struggling man broke free of Jack's grip and plummeted downwards with terrifying speed, his coat caught by the wind and flapping open like wings—wings that could never fly.

"Shit!" exclaimed Chelsea involuntarily, not caring if she was now on a live feed. She watched him drop, whipping past the windows behind him. Whatever happened, however messy things were, she had to be ready to turn to camera and deliver her report...

"No!" Jack yelled, the cops crashing against the parapet, against him, just a fraction of a second too late.

Amy watched, unable to look away, as Lonnie fell and started to scream. Nine floors up, eight, sevensix...

Lonnie's flapping coat snagged on one of the phone wires stretching across the street. It should have either torn under his weight or simply slid off as he fell past.

It didn't.

Instead, it wrapped around the cable, not once, but twice. Impossibly.

But impossible or not, it held. Lonnie was jolted to an abrupt, rib-breaking halt just two storeys above the ground.

Tracking Lonnie's fall, Brad was caught by surprise when the plunging figure suddenly stopped, continuing to tilt the camera all the way down to the ground before he realized something had happened. Reacting on cameraman's instinct, he snapped the zoom lens in to cover as wide an area as possible, Chelsea flashing into view as the picture pulled back. The guy was caught on something at the top of the frame...

Lonnie's coat finally ripped and he started to fall again.

Chelsea snapped her head round to look into the camera in amazement. "Did you get that?" she gasped.

The phone wire, freed of the sudden weight that had pulled it down, cracked like a whip, a wave motion rushing along its length towards the other side of the street.

Lonnie hit the ground, injured but still alive.

Amy barely had enough time to register what had just happened when something passed above her, a strange serpentine movement. The phone line...

The wave reached the end of the phone wire where it connected to the building where Amy, Brad and Chelsea were standing on the steps.

Ice had built up on the wall from a leaking pipe, growing one freezing drip at a time to spread like tentacles along the half-dozen lines running into the building. Hanging down below the cold mass were long, pointed icicles, melted and refrozen together over days into top-heavy masses with claw-like points.

The wave hit the heavy ice. Part of the motion was sent back along the wire; the rest was transmitted into the ice as a vibration.

The ice shattered with a sound like breaking glass.

Chelsea instinctively looked up at the unexpected noise directly above her.

It was the last living thing she ever did.

A chunk of ice, two huge icicles melded together with foot-long tips sharp as daggers, hit her in the face. The jagged spikes plunged right through both of her eyes in a wet spray of ruptured eyeball and spurting blood and brain matter. The sheer weight of the ice rammed the tips of the icicles right through the back of her skull before the shock of the impact sheared most of the frozen mass away. It crashed to the ground between Brad and Chelsea's still-standing corpse and exploded into jagged fragments.

Amy turned when she heard the noise, just in time to see the back of Chelsea's head burst open in a slurry of red and gray. The body somehow stayed balanced for a moment, hands twitching, before its knees slowly buckled and it toppled backwards down the steps, long shards of ice still protruding from its gushing eye sockets. Somebody

behind Amy shrieked. She would have done so herself if she'd been able to catch her breath.

A voice was yelling in Brad's ear. It took him some time to work out that it was George back at the studio frantically telling him that they were still live and asking him what had happened. The face in his viewfinder wasn't Chelsea but the young Asian cop they'd just interviewed, staring at him in horror.

Had what he'd just seen through his camera been real? He cautiously pulled his head back from the viewfinder and looked down.

It *had* been real.

"Did you get *that*?" he asked, of nobody in particular, before throwing up.

FOUR

An ambulance had been called to the scene at the same time as the police, and was waiting nearby to take Lonnie away in case he actually jumped. The paramedics on board were taken aback when they discovered that he was still alive even after jumping from the roof of a thirteen-storey building, which they agreed unanimously was something that almost never happened.

Jack and the cops raced down to the street after being startled to hear a smattering of applause, and even cheering, from below. By the time they got there, one of the cops' radios had already filled them in on the fact that Lonnie had somehow survived a drop of more than a hundred feet onto hard sidewalk—and more confusingly, that somebody else had apparently died as a result.

Jack didn't understand how this could have happened, as he couldn't see any sign of a body on the ground where the paramedics were putting Lonnie onto a stretcher. Lonnie hadn't landed on anyone. He hurried over to join him as the cops spread out to push the crowds back. Over the hubbub, he heard Amy's voice calling for Beriev, but ignored it.

"Excuse me, *sir*," one of the paramedics objected as Jack tried to get close enough to talk to Lonnie, "you'll have to move back."

"He's my friend!" Jack yelled, pointing at the stretcher and then gasping in pain as a dull burning sensation crawled across his chest. He was going to have a hell of a bruise where he'd been slammed against the edge of the parapet. "Lonnie!"

"Jack..." came the weak reply from the stretcher. Jack pushed around the complaining medic and moved to the head of the stretcher. Lonnie stared up at him, dazed.

"Lonnie! Jesus, you're okay, you're okay!"

"Yeah. Huh..." He took a wheezing breath, then screwed up his face in clear distress. "Oh, God, it hurts..."

"What happened to him?" Jack demanded of the medic. "Is he going to be okay?"

"He's got at least two broken ribs," the medic said, elbowing Jack to one side so that he could finish securing Lonnie on the stretcher, "and probably whiplash and some torn muscles. But apart from that, he should be okay. As for what happened... hell if I know. I'm going to have to watch it on the news like everyone else, 'cause I didn't believe it when I saw it."

Lonnie feebly waved a hand at Jack, motioning him to come closer. The medic looked annoyed, but stepped to one side to let him. "Jack... I guess you were right about something."

"About what, Lonnie?"

"It *was* the worst mistake of my life, getting out on that ledge... but I still got the chance to change it. Can you believe that?" His head lolled, leaving him gazing up at the cold blue sky above. "Oh, God. Jack, I've been given a second chance. Can you believe it? A second chance!"

"That's great, Lonnie," said Jack, squeezing Lonnie's hand. "Just make the most of it, okay? Promise me that."

"Oh yeah," Lonnie said, forcing out a small, pain-filled, but genuine laugh, "believe it."

The medic pushed Jack back. "Okay, let's go! Clear the way! Coming through!" Lonnie looked at Jack and gave him a last wave before the stretcher disappeared into the crowd, heading for the waiting ambulance.

Jack expected the crowd to start dispersing now that Lonnie had gone, but instead people were crowding on the other side of the street, gathering around the steps where the reporter had been standing. That must be where the other person had been killed... but how could Lonnie have had anything to do with it?

Despite himself, Jack's curiosity got the better of him and he wandered across to join the crowd.

Beriev watched the recording of Chelsea's final moments on the little monitor, flinching as the icicle hit. "Christ," he muttered.

"That was pretty much my reaction," Amy said, deliberately not watching the image on the screen. Having seen it happen for real, she didn't want to be reminded of it, even on a tiny five-inch monitor.

Beriev switched his attention from the screen to the scene in front of him. Amy followed his gaze. The other cops had formed a tight cordon around the base of the steps to keep the crowd away. One of the cops had put a jacket over the body, covering its head and upper chest, but there was no way to cover up the blood that had flowed down the steps, mixing with the snow and ice.

But it was better than the gory scene that had been there before. Brad the cameraman wasn't the only person who'd thrown up; the puddles of puke on the pavement were doing almost as good a job as the cops at holding people back.

"So what the hell happened?" Beriev asked, twisting his neck to look up at the building. "She was killed by an *icicle*?"

"Yeah," Amy said. "It landed right on her."

Beriev blew out his breath, shaking his head in disbelief. "Jesus. What are the odds on *that* happening? The leaper survives, and a completely random woman across the street dies instead? On live TV, at that." He turned to Brad, who was sitting on the building's doorstep, head in his hands. "Listen, I'm sorry about this, but we're gonna need to get a statement from you."

"Go ahead," Brad mumbled, still in shock.

Amy looked out across the crowd again as Beriev started questioning Brad, and spotted Jack on its periphery. She waved for him to join her, then moved down the steps, giving the body as wide a berth as she possibly could. It took Jack a few moments to reach the front of the crowd, Amy telling one of the cops to let him through.

"What happened?" Jack asked. He couldn't see much, as the wall of the steps blocked most of his view, but the blood and vomit on the sidewalk told him enough.

"That reporter, Chelsea Cox," Amy explained, not wanting look round but finding herself irresistibly compelled to keep glancing back, "she got, uh, killed. Right in front of me."

"What?" Jack was stunned. He hadn't particularly *liked* Chelsea from their brief encounter, but even so... "How?"

Amy pointed up at the phone wire. "See that cable there? When your friend fell, his coat got snagged on it. Saved his life—but then it kind of snapped back up and broke the ice on it at this end. An icicle fell right into her face when she looked up. I was standing on the steps right next to her." She made a face, suddenly feeling nauseous.

"You all right?" asked Jack.

"I'll be okay. Not the first body I've seen, but, well..." She winced. "Probably the messiest."

"Jesus." Jack followed the path of the phone line back across the street, then looked up at the roof from which Lonnie had fallen. That was odd. The phone line was several feet over from where Lonnie had been standing. If he'd fallen straight down, there should have been no way that he could have touched it, unless he'd been blown sideways by the wind. But there wasn't any.

Not now, but there *had* been, up on the roof...

"What's the matter?" Amy asked.

Jack shook his head. "Nothing. Just amazed that Lonnie survived. Glad, too. I mean, it's still horrible what happened to that reporter, but... It's just amazing that he got a second chance. I hope he makes the most of it."

"Yeah." Amy looked at the top of the steps, where Beriev was still taking details from Brad, then turned back to Jack. There was an awkward silence.

"Well, anyway," Jack finally said, "I'd better get, you know, moving. Get to the shelter before all the places are taken."

"Right. I hope your friend's okay."

"Do you know which hospital they took him to? I forgot to ask."

"Probably St Vincent's," Amy told him, working out which hospital was nearest to them in an instant from her knowledge of the city. "Either that or St Paul's."

"I'll go see if I can find him after he's been treated. Well, uh, see you around." Jack turned and walked away, looking back over his shoulder at her once, then blending into the crowd.

Amy watched him go, then leaned back against the wall. People were still wandering over trying to get a look at the body, though they weren't staying very long, she was relieved to note. Even the rubbernecks had limits to how long they could stare at a dead body...

What did the cameraman just say?

She scurried up the steps, almost vaulting the body in her haste, and grabbed Beriev by the sleeve as she jabbed a finger at Brad. "Say that again?"

Jack had barely even reached the end of the block before he heard someone calling his name. He almost didn't bother looking around—it was a common enough name, and he couldn't think why anyone would be shouting out for him—but he paused anyway.

The voice was Amy's. He turned, and was surprised to see her sprinting down the street towards him, looking extremely concerned about something.

"What?" he called back as she approached. "What's wrong? Has something happened to Lonnie?"

She skidded to a stop in front of him, kicking up snow from the sidewalk and drawing in a deep breath. "Tell me *everything* you remember about that vision of yours." It was an order, not a request.

"What?"

She grabbed him by the forearms, jerking him closer to her. "The vision! I need to know what was in it, *exactly!*"

"Jesus, what? What's going on?" Jack looked past her to see Beriev jogging towards them, clearly out of breath even from the fairly short run.

"Amy," Beriev puffed, "what's the matter? Why'd you take off like that? You feeling sick?"

"I'm fine, Pete, I'm fine," Amy insisted, waving him away. "I just remembered something I forgot to ask Jack."

Beriev was instantly suspicious. "What about?"

"Nothing important."

"Important enough to make you take off like a damn greyhound, though?"

Amy released Jack's arms and wheeled on Beriev. "Christ, Pete! That guy just told you! Chelsea Cox's address?"

"What about it?"

"Duh!" Amy said, waving her hands in frustration. "Right next door to that alley! You know, last night, me, attacked by a psycho, where Chelsea Cox lives!"

Beriev raised an eyebrow. "So what?"

"So what?" Amy repeated in disbelief. "Don't you think that's just a bit weird?"

"She's gotta live *somewhere*," said Beriev, exasperation entering his voice. "It's a coincidence, that's all."

Jack came to the opposite conclusion at that point, but decided to keep it to himself.

"But, but," Amy spluttered, "there's a guy with a knife hanging around right outside her apartment last night, and this morning she's *dead*? You don't think that's, y'know, odd?"

"You know who else is dead?" asked Beriev, exasperation turning into genuine annoyance. "The guy in the alley! Curtis here," he shot a narrow-eyed glare of dislike at Jack, "blew his fuckin' head off! What, you think he had Jack Frost as an accomplice, to kill her by dropping an icicle onto her head? Christ!" He shook his head. "Amy, don't take this the wrong way or nothing, but I think you really do need to go for that check-up. As soon as possible."

Amy stared at him for a moment, mouth agape. "Fuck you, Pete!" she finally managed to blurt out.

"Hey!" Beriev yelled, angry. "Don't you tell me to fuck me! You watch your mouth, young lady!"

"Young lady?" hooted Amy. "What are you, my *grandmother* now? Come on, Jack." She grabbed him by the arm again and set off away from Beriev, pulling Jack after her with surprising strength.

"The hell you goin' with him?" Beriev demanded.

"I dunno, Pete," Amy sneered back at him with a voice overflowing with sarcasm, "maybe I'll go and fuck him instead!"

Beriev's face at that was certainly a picture, Jack thought. He just wished he had a camera to capture it. The cop looked as though he was about to explode with rage, making Jack acutely aware that he was carrying a gun. "I think they, er, want you back," he said, pointing along the street. Even though it was true, and a cop *was* calling out for Beriev, he stood there glaring at them until Amy hauled Jack around the corner.

She led him about twenty yards down the street, then released him and kicked a newspaper dispenser. "Fuck! God damn it! I shouldn't have blown up like that."

"He was being kind of a... jerk," Jack said, something stronger in mind but deciding not to say it.

"That's a story that'll have gone five times around the squad room and got 'funnier' each time by the time I get back to work," Amy moaned. Cops! When it came to spreading gossip, the proverbial housewives had nothing on them.

"I don't think any of the others heard it," said Jack.

"Oh, you watch, it's like radar or something. I'm gonna be 'young lady' for the next twenty years now." She kicked at a pile of snow on the edge of the sidewalk, scattering it into the road. "Well, shit. What's done is done, I guess."

Jack gave her a few more seconds to simmer down. "Why did you want to know about my... vision?"

Amy pushed her fight with Beriev to the back of her mind, her anger fading as she remembered there were more important things to consider. She checked the street, spotting a diner on the other side. "You want to get something to eat?"

"Always," Jack pointed out.

"I definitely need a coffee. Come on."

"Hope for your sake they have decaf," Jack said to himself as Amy led him across the road.

The diner was a cheap and characterless place, a long, narrow room with the tables and chairs squeezed just that little bit too tightly together. A handful of people were seated, eating unenthusiastically. A television was fixed high on the wall in the back corner by the kitchen entrance, soundlessly showing a talk show. A

waitress with big hair and sunken cheeks came over as Amy and Jack sat down at a table by the window. Her sour expression became even more puckered as she looked Jack up and down.

"There a problem?" Amy asked, staring down the waitress.

"Maybe," she said, her eyes darting towards a nearby sign concerning the management's right to refuse service to anyone they didn't like the look of.

Amy sighed and pulled out her police badge. "There a problem now?"

"No, *ma'am*." The waitress now seemed to have the juice of at least two whole lemons in her mouth. "What can I get you?"

"Black coffee, bacon, French toast. Jack, what do you want?"

"The same," Jack said, wishing he'd had more time to examine the menu. Amy seemed to have speed-read it.

"Coming right up." The waitress gave Jack a last look of disapproval, then headed for the kitchen.

"Great," Amy said, watching her go, "we're probably going to get the spit-in-yer-food special now."

"You know, that really doesn't bother me any more," Jack told her. "I've had a lot worse. What did you want to ask me?"

Amy glanced around to make sure that nobody was listening in on their conversation, then leaned towards Jack across the table, her voice dropping. "Jack, you said that in your vision, the next person you saw was a woman. Was it Chelsea Cox?"

Jack had suspected Amy was going to ask him that. He struggled to remember, the image remaining just ever so slightly beyond his reach, never quite coming into focus. "It... might have been. I don't know, it was all so fast."

"Was she blonde or brunette?" Amy's voice took on a businesslike tone. Jack supposed it was the same voice she used when questioning witnesses.

"Blonde," he said, the answer coming without him having to think about it.

"Old or young?"

"Young."

"Jack, was it Chelsea Cox?"

"Yeah, I think it... Hey." He blinked at her. "I think it was."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." The image was fixed now, and as he closed his eyes he tried to flick it back and forth with the face of the reporter who'd thrust a microphone into his face.

"And you told me that in the vision, there was something about her eyes."

"No," Jack said, the memory coming back. "It wasn't her eyes, it was... they were gone. Her eyes were missing, they were just... empty holes. Full of blood." He shivered, and it wasn't because he was cold.

Amy looked at him with an expression of disquiet. "Chelsea Cox got hit—*impaled*, rather—in the eyes by an icicle. *That* left just empty holes full of blood. Now I'm not normally one for all that *X Files* crap, but that strikes me as being just a little bit too exact to be a coincidence. *Especially* when it happens the morning after a psycho with a knife was hanging around outside her house for hours."

"Yeah, but I..." Jack stopped, not wanting to relive the experience as the gun fired, the muzzle flash lighting up the man's face... "What, so you're saying she died today because she was meant to die last night?"

"You're the one with the visions," Amy said defensively, "you tell me. You said you saw other people. Who were they?"

"I don't know."

"Was the one after Chelsea a man or a woman?"

"Er... a man."

"Old or young?"

"Five more people," Amy said, counting them off on her fingers. "Man, woman, man, woman, and somebody you're not sure about. Before that, you saw a vision of me, and you saw a vision of Chelsea Cox. I survived a potentially fatal encounter, she... didn't." She pushed away her plate, and spotted Jack eyeing the leftovers. "Go ahead."

"No, I'm okay, really..."

"Jack, will you just eat the damn food? Now, I'd be inclined to believe in the coincidence theory—if you hadn't saved me last night. But as far as I can tell, you're two for two with the predictions so far."

Jack stopped chewing. "Only one for two," he said grimly. "Chelsea's still dead."

"Yeah, but you were up on the roof trying to save Lonnie," Amy pointed out. "And he wasn't in your vision."

"You mean I shouldn't have bothered with Lonnie and just hung around with Chelsea to push her out of the way of any falling ice, huh?" said Jack, frowning.

"That's not what I said..." Amy's voice tailed off. "But what if you're right?"

"What?"

"The other people in your vision—what if you *can* save them?"

Jack looked at her skeptically. "So, what, you're saying that the people in the vision were somehow *destined* to die, but I can stop that from happening?"

"You saved me."

"I didn't save Chelsea."

"You weren't trying to, because you didn't know." They looked into each other's eyes, seeing the idea forming. "What if, now that you *do* know," Amy began, excitement rising in her voice, "you *can* stop it? If you can find out who the people in your vision are, we could warn them!"

Jack's eyebrows rose. "We?"

"I'm a part of this too," Amy insisted. "Besides, it doesn't look like I'm going back to work any time soon, and I really, *really* hate just sitting around with nothing to do."

Jack leaned back in his chair. "You know, if it wasn't for the fact that I'm the one who *had* the damn vision, I'd say this was all Psychic TV bullshit. But..." His gaze flicked across the now half-full diner to the television in the far corner, which was silently frothing with news of Chelsea's death. He leaned forward again, moving closer to Amy. "How do we find them? I didn't recognize any of the faces."

"Well, the way I see it there's two ways we can go about it," Amy said. "The first is, we can wander around the city at random and

hope that we happen to come across them just before they step out in front of a bus, or..." She saw Jack's expression change, tension rising in him mixed with... sadness? "Jack? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Jack said, voice tight. He quickly tried to change the subject. "Go on, what were you saying?"

"Or," Amy continued, giving him a look of curious concern, "we could do some police work."

"How do you mean?"

"I was attacked in the alley by that guy last night. The alley was right next to Chelsea Cox's apartment, so he might have been waiting for her."

Jack waited for the explanation. "And?" he said after a pause, unable to take the suspense.

"And," Amy said with a note of triumph, "the common factor is the guy from the alley. So we need to find out who he is, what he was doing, and *why*." She stood, reaching in her pocket for a tip. She was about to put down ten per cent when she remembered how snotty the waitress had been, and dropped a couple of coins instead. What the hell, she wasn't going to come to this dump again anyway. "You ever been to a morgue?"

For some reason Jack had been expecting stainless steel and cold, clinical, white rooms, but the morgue at St Vincent's hospital had a distinctly gothic feel to it, matching the generally outdated and slightly shabby feel of the institution as a whole. He half expected to look into a room and see Hannibal Lecter staring back at him.

Even though Amy was off duty, Jack was impressed by the way that she'd simply breezed into the hospital, greeting nurses and orderlies by name and getting smiles in return as she swept through the corridors with him in her wake. "That's something Pete taught me," she said, pushing open the swinging double doors of the morgue. "It's always worth getting to know the people who actually do the work in public facilities, rather than the paper-pushers. At the

very least it makes it a lot easier to deal with the place, and you never know when you might need to call in a favor."

"I'm glad he's good for something," Jack replied, trying to keep his sarcasm down to a bare minimum. There was something about being in a morgue that made using any kind of humor seem inappropriate.

"He is a great guy, normally," insisted Amy. "He's taught me a hell of a lot about being a good cop. He's just got a bit of an edge to him—he got divorced last year, kind of nasty—and he can be a bit... over-protective."

Jack decided to keep his snippy retort to himself as he looked around. Sickly green strip lights put a bilious cast over the room, and he didn't want to think about the contents of the row of oversized lockers with heavy cast-metal doors lining one wall. The only new-looking items he could see were a computer on a desk in one corner and the three stainless steel tables, to his relief all unoccupied, in the center of the morgue, slightly inclined and with prominent drainage holes at the base. Another set of doors opposite led into a second room, which seemed dark. The whole place was filled with a nostril-stinging smell of cleaning solutions. "So what are we looking for?"

"First thing I want to do," Amy said, walking over to the desk, "is have a look at the path report. Pathology, I mean. Dr Klugman, the pathologist, he's an okay guy, he shouldn't have any problems with letting me see it." She started to flip through a pile of folders on the desk. Jack moved over to join her, feeling uneasy about the surroundings. "See if it's come up with any ID on our guy, if he was on drugs, anything like that. Then it might be worth having a look at the body, if we can swing it."

Jack made a face. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because death can sometimes tell you more about a person than life." Amy and Jack both jumped as a deep voice rolled around the room behind them. Amy whirled to see who it was, Jack following much more cautiously.

Leaning against the set of doors on the far side of the room was a very tall black man, the top of his head short of the door frame by just a fraction of an inch. He was watching them with a sly smile,

having noiselessly opened the doors to listen in on their conversation.

"Who are you?" Amy demanded.

The man straightened and walked slowly across the room, his feet barely making a sound on the tiled floor. "I'm the mortician," he said, as if it were patently obvious that he couldn't be anything else.

Amy gave him a dubious look. "Where's Robert?"

"He's on vacation," the man said, stopping in front of them. Even Jack, at six foot two, had to tilt his head back to look up at him, something he wasn't used to doing. "I'm covering for him while he's away—I normally work upstate. My name's William." He extended a hand. "Call me Bill."

"Amy Tom. Um, Officer Amy Tom," said Amy, warily raising her own hand, pausing before taking Bill's. He smiled again.

"The only thing I've had in my hands recently have been sandwiches," he assured her. Amy gave a slightly embarrassed half-laugh before shaking his hand. His palm was practically twice the size of hers, swallowing up her whole hand in surprisingly soft flesh. "And you?"

"Um, Jack Curtis," Jack said. Even his hand seemed like a child's against Bill's.

"Not an officer?" Bill asked, in a tone that suggested he already knew the answer.

"No. Not anything much at the moment, actually."

"Oh, everybody's something," said Bill, releasing Jack's hand and turning to the row of lockers. "Until the moment that everybody fears the most, at least. Then they become... this." He seized the handle of one of the lockers and theatrically yanked it open, the shelf inside sliding out as if caught in the slipstream. Jack flinched and Amy's mouth twitched when they saw that there was a body on the shelf, inside a black rubber bag.

"W-what are you doing?" Amy asked.

"Exactly what you wanted," Bill said, a look of subtle glee in his eyes. "You wanted to see the body."

Jack regarded him cautiously, not wanting to look at the shiny black bag. "How do you know which body we want to see? *She* wants

to see, I mean. *I don't want to see it...*"

Bill didn't answer, instead giving him a somewhat unsettling smile and unzipping the bag in one movement with a harsh, metallic ripping sound. Jack made an involuntary noise of revulsion and looked off to one side when the rubber fell away to reveal the ravaged face of the man he'd shot the night before. "John Doe, number NYC zero six, zero one, zero one eight," he announced in his sonorous voice.

Amy's stomach churned at the sight, but she forced it under control and reluctantly took a step forward. The face was a sodden, shredded mass, a fist-sized hole between the jaw and the eye. She guessed that the bullet had clipped the edge of the jaw on its way in, smashing the teeth, then hit the cheekbone on its trajectory upwards and been deflected back out through the cheek, taking a large part of the upper jaw with it and tearing away flesh and arteries as it went. The end result looked almost as though a small bomb had exploded inside the man's head.

"So, uh," she began, her mouth going dry. She cleared her throat. "So what can you tell us about him?"

"What, indeed?" Bill answered. "Shall we start with the basics? Caucasian male, age approximately fifty-five, height six feet, weight two hundred and twelve pounds. Hair black tending to gray, eyes blue." He took a scalpel from a nearby trolley and tapped lightly at the corpse's chest with the blade, indicating a rough-edged incision in a Y-shape. "No tattoos, no evidence of major illness, alcoholism or drug use, no operation scars." He moved the scalpel to one of the dead hands. "Recent small cuts to the hands and fingers, apparently from accidental knife wounds. Stomach contents," his basso voice registering a hint of amusement as he ran through the list, "low-grade beef, eggs, peas, cola drink, fruit salad, consumed approximately three hours before the time of death. Which according to the police report was..."

"We know when it was," Jack cut in, still not wanting to look at the body and now feeling actively nauseous after Bill's description of the stomach contents. "We were both there."

"I see." He didn't sound the least bit surprised. "So I imagine you won't be needing me to tell you the cause of death?"

"Not really," Amy said, annoyed. "But we would like to know who he is."

Bill shook his head. "Not my department, I'm afraid. That's something you'll have to ask Dr Klugman when he gets back. Fingerprints and mugshots aren't my concern. I just... prepare the dead."

"So there's nothing else you can tell us?" asked Amy.

Bill's smile cracked into a full-bodied, if still disturbing toothy grin. "Oh, there's plenty more I can tell you. Or rather, *he* can. The dead talk... if you just know how to listen." In a sharp, swift movement, he ran the tip of his scalpel across the dead man's waist. The skin split cleanly open, the yellowish fat beneath sagging away on each side with a wet plop as the tension on it was released. Amy gasped, and Jack, who had just plucked up the nerve to look round again, let out a disgusted yelp and hurriedly turned away.

"Are you allowed to *do* that?" Amy asked, appalled.

"Oh, he's already been talking to me," Bill said. "He's been telling me that nobody's going to come and claim his body. He belongs to me now."

"I hope you'll be very happy together," Jack muttered, still unable to watch. Amy took a step closer to the body, reluctantly looking down at where Bill was still tapping his scalpel.

"Now, what does this tell us?" Bill asked softly, more to himself than Amy or Jack. "The rest of the body is muscular, hardened, the result of a lot of work. But the belly is still soft, still with some reserves of fat." He lifted his eyes from the body to fix Amy with an intent, questioning stare. "What does that suggest to you, Officer Tom?"

Amy considered it for a moment, feeling uncomfortably like she was being tested on her police exams again. "That... he's been training intensely, but only for a fairly short period. He hasn't had the time to burn off all his fat reserves, or... he's not bothered about doing so. He hasn't been working out for show, but for a *purpose*, and it's a purpose he's only been working towards since recently."

"Very good," Bill said. Had the remark come from anyone else Amy would have considered it patronizing, but in this case it sounded sincere, almost as though she'd passed a test. "And this purpose would be...?"

"Hanging around in alleys at night with a big-ass hunting knife," Jack cut in impatiently.

"Correct again," said Bill, unsettlingly. He took hold of the fastener on the body bag and slowly drew the zipper closed, each tooth making a clicking sound as it interlocked with its counterparts. "Our friend here was intending to keep me busy during Robert's vacation. I do enjoy my trips down to the city," he added, sealing the bag and slowly sliding the body back through the drifting cold vapors into the freezer. "There's always so much going on. Thing is, sometimes events take on a life of their own, carrying on without the person who first set them in motion. Wouldn't you agree?" He slammed the door closed with a sudden bang that echoed around the room, then moved a few steps to another locker.

"You seem to know a lot about this," Amy said, with a faint hint of accusation.

"I know a lot about death," Bill said by way of a reply, taking the handle of the locker in one of his huge hands. "Spend as long with him as I do..." He yanked the handle and swung the door open, another shelf sliding out with another, smaller body. "...you start to see his patterns."

Jack didn't even want to look this time. "Who's that?"

"A new arrival," said Bill, almost sounding proud. "A celebrity, at that."

"Chelsea Cox?" Amy gulped.

"The very same." He slid the zipper of the body bag down, just enough to reveal Chelsea's head, her mouth still gaping in shock. The ice piercing her eye sockets had partially melted before reaching the morgue, then re-frozen inside the chilled metal locker, giving it a frosted, roughened appearance. Disgusted as she was, Amy couldn't take her eyes off the sight. She heard Jack stepping away, trying to suppress his retching.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you what she had for breakfast," Bill said, amusement evident in his low voice. "Dr Klugman hasn't done the autopsy yet. But you don't need a pathology report to know when, where and how she died, do you?"

Amy felt a chill run through her that had nothing to do with the vapors wafting out of the locker. "How do you know that?"

Bill gave her a smile that seemed to have a hint of sadness behind it. "Like I said, spend enough time with death, you start to see his patterns. And if those patterns get messed up... then boy, does that fucker get pissed off." He gestured meaningfully at Chelsea, before zipping the body bag back up. "Once you're on his list, he doesn't rest until he's crossed you off it."

Jack turned and stalked back over to the open locker. "So what are you saying? That even though I killed that guy in the freezer there before he could kill Chelsea, she died anyway because she was on death's hit list?"

With a seemingly light push, Bill sent the shelf holding Chelsea's body sliding back into the locker. A hollow metallic clang rolled around the morgue as it hit the end of its runners. He slowly swung the door closed with a thud of finality. "*You* said that," he said, calmly. "It's not really my place to comment."

"Bullshit," Jack snapped. He held out his hands to encompass the room. "If anywhere's your place, this is it!"

Bill ignored him. "Now, if you'll excuse me," he said, heading back to the doors, "my lunch break is over. And I have a feeling I'm going to be busy over the next few days. Just a feeling." He shot a grin back over his shoulder at them, then pushed the doors open.

"Wait!" Amy pleaded. Bill stopped. "Is there anything you can do to help us?"

"I'm afraid that's all up to you now," he replied, face serious. "Nobody else can help you. But if you want to improve your chances... watch for the signs. They're always there. You just have to recognize them. Be seeing you." And then he was gone, the doors swinging back and forth behind him with a soft *whump* each time they passed each other, until they came to a silent stop.

"Watch the signs..." Jack said. The words had stirred something in his memory, but he couldn't quite pin it down. Unless... "You remember before I went up on the roof, I thought I saw something falling, but there was nothing there?" Amy nodded. "Would that count as a sign?"

"I don't know," Amy admitted. The conversation with the mortician had left her bewildered, and also somewhat scared. "But if the other people that psycho was after really are going to die just like Chelsea, we've still got no way of finding out who they are. We've got no idea who he was, where he lived, what his plan was! We need to find the—"

The main doors to the morgue opened, a plump, bespectacled man in his fifties walking into the room, noisily sucking orange juice through a straw from a small carton. He stopped in surprise when he saw Jack and Amy standing by the desk, then peered at Amy with dawning recognition. "Officer... Tom, isn't it?"

"Hi, Dr Klugman," Amy said, going to him and shaking his hand.

"Haven't seen you out of uniform before. Already made detective?" He looked Jack up and down as if trying to place him.

"No, not yet," Amy said, moving around to take his attention away from Jack. "I'm... off-duty. This is more of an informal visit."

Dr Klugman chuckled. "An informal visit! We don't get many of those around here." He slurped up the last of his juice, and put the carton down on his desk. "What can I do for you?"

"You had a John Doe come in last night," Amy explained, "number zero six, zero one, zero one, er, eight?"

"Ah, yes," Dr Klugman said, his eyes lighting up, "GSW to the face, rather messy. Attacked a police officer, so I was told! Never a smart thing to do."

"Not really. I was hoping that you could tell me if he's been ID'd yet."

Dr Klugman looked pained. "I'd like to, but... well, I'm sure you know the rules. I can't just give out information like that to anyone who asks. There are procedures to be followed."

"Dr Klugman," said Amy, pointing to the bandage on her head, "the officer he attacked... was me. Please? I really need to know who

he is."

"Ah, I see..." said Dr Klugman, shifting uncomfortably. "Well... okay. But if anyone asks..."

"...I never read it," Amy finished. Dr Klugman made an appreciative noise, then opened a drawer in the desk and rifled through the folders inside, pulling one out.

"Here's the path report," he said, handing it to her, "nothing too exciting in there, I'm afraid, but have a look. I'll just check the computer—there might have been a fingerprint match by now."

Amy opened the folder, and was taken by surprise when a small plastic bag slipped out of it. Jack bent over and picked it up off the floor. It contained a key ring, bearing a single key.

"Can you believe it?" Dr Klugman asked, glancing round as he typed in his password. "That was the only personal item he had on him. No wallet, no credit cards, not even any money, just a single key. Well, that and a rather large knife."

"Any idea what it's for?" Jack asked, turning the bag over in his hands.

"That's your department, not mine, I'm afraid," said Dr Klugman. He stopped typing to give Jack a look. "Er... I didn't catch your name, officer..."

"Any luck with those fingerprints?" Amy hurriedly cut in, leaning over his shoulder to look at the screen.

"Just a second, let's see..." A progress bar crawled across the screen, a chime sounding when it reached the end and brought up the result... "Ah. 'No match found.' I'm afraid not. It looks as though our John Doe has led a crime-free life—well, until he decided to attack you last night, at least. It also means he's never been a member of the military, the intelligence services or a government agency, not that I would have pegged him for the last two from his appearance." He clicked his tongue between his teeth. "I suppose there's a chance the DNA test might turn up something if he's had any hospital admissions in the last few years, but that's rather a long shot... and it'll take a few days to get the results back anyway."

"Damn." Amy stood up straight, dejected. "So we'll never find out who he is."

"Not unless you can find the lock that matches that key," said Dr Klugman, logging off the computer. "And the chances of that are... well, rather slim, I'm afraid." He held out his hands for the folder and the plastic bag, slipping the latter back inside the former after taking them.

"I don't know," Jack said to Amy, to her mind suddenly sounding oddly upbeat. "Bill said we should watch out for the signs... and I think I just saw one."

"What?" asked Amy, confused.

"Oh, you've met William!" Dr Klugman exclaimed as he replaced the folder in the drawer. "Fascinating fellow, plenty of stories to tell. All rather morbid and gruesome, I admit, but that's kind of an occupational hazard in this line of work. Still interesting stuff, though. He's certainly a man who enjoys his work. He came all the way down from Mount Abraham to cover for Robert."

"Mount Abraham!" Jack exclaimed, shocked.

Amy glanced at him. "What?"

He ignored her, instead hurriedly starting for the exit. "Thanks for your help, Dr Klugman," he said as he shoved the doors open. Amy stared after him.

"Jack, where are you—*Jack!*" She looked helplessly back and forth between the swinging door and Dr Klugman for a moment. "Doctor, thanks for all your help. I owe you one."

"Oh, no problem," Dr Klugman told her. "Any time you feel like dropping by..."

Amy said her goodbyes and hurried after Jack, finding the corridor outside empty. For a second she wondered if he'd run away, but then heard a noise from a side room. The men's bathroom. "Jack?"

"Out in a minute," came the miserable reply.

She heard the sound of a toilet flushing and running water, then Jack emerged, looking pale. "Sorry about that," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand. "Typical. The first proper meal I've had for ages..."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just being in that room finally got to me."

Amy looked at him, concerned. "What was all that about Mount Abraham? Where is it?"

"It's a town upstate," Jack told her. "You remember Flight 180?"

"Flight 180?" Amy thought about it. "Oh, yeah. Blew up on takeoff at JFK a few years back, right?"

"Yeah. There were some survivors, who got off before the plane exploded. They were all from Mount Abraham." Amy gave him a "go on" nod. "And I used to drive through there quite often."

"Uh-huh," said Amy. "And... that's kind of a coincidence, but..."

"After today, I'm not sure if I believe in coincidences any more." His expression changed, a sly smile creeping across his face. "But right now, it's not really important. What is important is finding where the dead guy was living."

"Jack," Amy said impatiently, "I don't know if you were listening in there or not, but they haven't been able to ID him. Which means we've got no way of finding out where he lived."

"We don't need to," Jack grinned. He held up the key that he'd taken while Klugman had been concentrating on the computer. "I already know."

FIVE

The bus ground noisily through the slush covering the Manhattan streets, stopping and starting with a judder at each set of lights, air brakes hissing and squealing. It had been some time since Jack had been on a bus, and it brought back plenty of memories. Few of them were all that interesting, he had to admit.

But the dull ones were the ones he was concentrating on. Any of them were better than the one he was trying to suppress. But the more he tried not to think about it, the more vivid it became.

A blur in the corner of his eye suddenly moving in front of him and taking on shocking clarity, a flash of red...

"Jack?"

He blinked and looked round. Amy was giving him a look of worry from her seat next to him.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Fine, fine. Just tired. Didn't get much sleep last night."

Amy stretched. "I know what you mean. I was asleep last night, but I was under sedation, so it doesn't really count." She peered out of the window, seeing Columbus Circle slip by as the bus made its laborious, dog-legging way uptown. "How much further?"

"Not far now," Jack assured her.

"I still can't believe you stole that key," Amy said disapprovingly, lowering her voice in case any of the other occupants of the bus were listening in. "That's evidence! And what happens when Dr Klugman finds it's missing? He'll know it was us who took it!"

"No, he won't," said Jack. "I switched it with my old key. I sure as hell didn't have any more use for it, seeing as..." His voice tailed off.

"Yeah?"

Jack sighed. "It was the key to my old apartment. I used to live in Jersey back before... well, back before I ended up like this." He gestured at himself, at the grubby, well-worn clothes and scraggly hair and beard. "My ex-wife changed the locks after we split up. I just kept it for, well, sentimental reasons, I suppose. But I finally figured

that sentiment wasn't doing me any good, so I might as well do something useful with it."

"You were married?"

"Four years." Jack turned his head slightly away from Amy, gazing blankly at the passing buildings as they slipped past the bus. "Her name was Jennifer. We met at college."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know," Jack reluctantly admitted. "I haven't seen her since... since she threw me out."

Amy waited for him to keep talking, but Jack had nothing else to say. She was desperate to ask him more, but recognized his silence for what it was. Instead, she changed to a different, equally burning line of questioning. "Where are we going?"

"There's some wharves on the Hudson, up past 59th Street," Jack said, turning back to her. "Old warehouses, stuff like that. As far as I know they're derelict, but I guess somebody still owns them." He took the purloined key from his pocket, showing Amy the leather fob. It was battered and scratched, but the remains of a logo in worn gold leaf was still discernible. "Some of the buildings, we—homeless people—used to try and get into to sleep there. There were a couple of places that were fairly easy to get into, but one of the wharves was sealed up tight, and had security guards watching it. At least, it did the last time I tried to get in there, which was maybe six months ago."

"You hadn't tried since?" Amy asked.

"I heard from a few people that the security guards could be kinda rough on anyone they caught. Anyway, this," he held up the fob, tapping at the faded symbol, "is the logo of the company that owns the place. It's painted on a couple of the buildings. When I saw it, I thought that the dead guy might have had some connection to it—maybe he even used to work there or something."

Amy gave him an approving look. "Not bad," she said. "You ever thought of joining the police?"

"Somehow I don't think I'd quite fit in," Jack replied.

"I dunno, we're always looking to recruit from minorities, and I guess the homeless count," Amy joked. She took a closer look at the

key fob. "Wonder why they didn't come up with a match for this logo on the computer?"

"It might not *be* in the computer," said Jack. "The place looks like it's been closed up for years. Somebody told me once that whole part of the docks was going to be torn down and redeveloped, but it all fell through because of 9/11. So it's just been left to rot ever since."

"Hmm." Amy considered this. "I suppose, if you're a psycho planning to go on a killing spree, it's probably a better place to use as a base of operations than your apartment building. Fewer neighbours. Probably," she said jokingly, "more room than any Manhattan apartment, as well."

"Maybe, but the neighbourhood's not so great," Jack said. "Unless you really, *really* like boats." They both smiled. The bus lurched around a corner, turning northwards. "Better get off at the next stop. This is as close as the bus gets."

"What, we have to walk two blocks?" Amy complained.

"Hey, this is the first time in a couple of years that I've been able to get *anywhere* without walking," Jack pointed out. "You try walking thirty blocks in the snow when you haven't had anything to eat for two days."

Amy's face fell. "Jack, I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay, it's okay!" Jack hurried assured her. "I didn't mean anything, I was just joking. Which," he said, giving her a slight smile, "is something else I haven't done much of for a while."

"Glad I could help," Amy said, still feeling guilty. "This stop?"

"This stop." Amy rang the bell, and they headed for the front of the bus.

Jack had been completely accurate in his description of the wharf as having been "left to rot," Amy thought. Jutting out into the Hudson was a wooden pier, a crumbling warehouse running along most of its length, that in terms of color brought to mind a bad tooth. The whole thing looked as though it was going to collapse under its own damp, moldy weight and pitch into the river at any moment.

He'd also been right about the logo being painted on the buildings, but it was so faded, peeling and cracking away from the surface under God knew how many years' onslaught from bleaching sun and scouring rain, that it was barely visible. "You know, you've got pretty damn good observational skills to have spotted it," she told him. "Maybe you should reconsider that whole police thing."

"Maybe I will," Jack said. "First things first, though. We need to find a way in here." Falling apart it may have been, but the wharf was still cut off from the rest of the city by a weathered though still imposing chain-link fence, topped high above them by coils of rusted barbed wire and dotted with "Danger: Keep Out" signs.

"I think there's a gate down there." Amy pointed at a spot a few dozen yards away. They walked towards it. "Looks like it's padlocked."

Jack took out the key. "Well, better hope this opens it, because I can't see any other way to get in apart from climbing the fence."

Amy glanced up at the barbed wire. "The hell with that. Here, better give me the key."

"Why?"

"'Cause I'm a police officer and you're not. If I open it, it gets you off the hook for trespass, forced entry, whatever. Kind of."

Jack handed her the key. "Only kind of?"

"Seeing as I'm officially off duty on medical leave pending an examination," Amy said, hefting the heavy padlock in her hand and trying to insert the key, "I shouldn't be here at all. So I might find myself in the courtroom right next to you."

"That's reassuring."

The key slipped into the lock on the second attempt. It was quite stiff. "On the other hand, I could claim probable cause. Or concussion-induced insanity. Ah!" With more effort than she'd expected, the key finally turned and the padlock popped open. She wiggled the hasp free of the heavy chain, and pulled the whole lot away from the gate, which creaked open. "Here we go."

"Don't you need a warrant or something?" Jack asked as he cautiously followed Amy through the gate, looking around to see if anyone was watching.

"Concussion insanity!" Amy sang, pointing at her bandage. She headed for the nearest building, a small wooden hut not far from the gate, on the cracked concrete of the dockside rather than the slimy wood of the pier proper.

"I think that was where the guards worked," Jack told her. Amy approached the door, reaching into her coat and pulling out a small metal flashlight. A firm push from her toe opened the door, and she shone the light into the dimly-lit room beyond. "See anything?"

"Looks like it hasn't been used for a while," Amy said. The beam from the torch picked out a small office behind the grimy windows, dust and dirt forming a thin film over what little was inside. A cheap folding table, a couple of chairs, a moldering pile of old newspapers and magazines on a small counter...

"I guess they must have stopped guarding the place when the money ran out," said Jack, looking over Amy's shoulder into the hut.

"Yeah, a padlock and a couple of feet of chain's cheaper than paying somebody minimum wage," Amy mused. A lot of ex-cops ended up working as security guards to supplement their pensions. She hoped she wouldn't have to be one of them.

Assuming this little escapade left her with a pension to collect, that was...

She ran the light around the room again. No sign of recent footprints on the floor. Markings in—no, under—the dirt showed where fittings had been removed. A small electric hob or something similar had been on the counter at one point, to judge from the coffee spills that marked the position of its base. Something else had been in a corner—a heater? Probably paraffin, since there were no electrical sockets nearby. She reached for the light switch by the door, flicking it a couple of times. Although there was a bulb overhead, it remained dark.

"Looks like they didn't pay the electric bill either," Jack commented.

"Looks like." Amy switched off her flashlight and backed out of the hut. "Let's try the pier."

Jack looked dubiously at the discolored planking. He could see the cold gray water of the river a good fifteen feet below through the gaps

between the boards. "Doesn't look that safe."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, as long as we don't try to do the Riverdance on it," Amy told him. Nevertheless, she still took her first step onto the pier proper with a certain amount of trepidation. The wood creaked, but showed no sign of imminent collapse. She took another couple of cautious steps, then turned to face Jack. "You coming?"

"I suppose..." Jack said, trying to think light thoughts. He followed Amy warily along the pier towards the first available entrance to the warehouse.

Amy tried the door, expecting it to be locked, and was surprised when it opened. Switching on her flashlight again, she examined peered into the darkness. What was visible of the large space beyond seemed unoccupied, a dim light coming through the grimy, cracked windows and illuminating a sodden floor, pools of water everywhere from leaks in the ceiling.

"What can you see?" Jack asked, trying to look around her.

"Nothing, yet." She leaned through the doorway to check that there was nobody lurking against the inside wall—not that she was expecting there to be anybody there, but following her police training anyway—before moving inside. The darkened chamber smelled of damp and decay. "Looks empty so far. Come inside. Don't touch anything if you can help it."

Jack followed her in, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to force them to adjust to the gloom. He looked down the length of the warehouse, which as far as he could tell was empty apart from sodden trash on the floor. He could see light part-way along the wall, coming up from below; a hole in the planking was letting in reflections from the river.

He walked towards the hole as Amy moved across the warehouse, shining her light up at the ceiling. The hole, he saw as he drew closer, wasn't the result of rotting timber giving up the ghost, but had clearly been made deliberately.

He knew why. He'd seen it before in other derelict buildings. You don't shit where you sleep. Somebody had knocked a hole in the floor to take advantage of the great natural waste disposal below, the Hudson River.

"Someone's been living here," he called to Amy.

"You sure?"

"Trust me."

Amy's flashlight played across a skeletal flight of wooden stairs, which led up a second level of the warehouse, an enclosed balcony of offices overlooking the cavernous main room. "Jack, over here."

He hurried over, splashing through the puddles. "Think he was living up there?"

"Let's find out." Amy started up the stairs, flashlight held up in her left hand. She had an odd feeling that something was missing, taking a moment to realize that it was her gun. Normally in this kind of situation, she would have her hand on the butt, ready to draw it. All of a sudden she felt very exposed.

"You okay?" asked Jack, who'd come to a halt behind her.

"Fine." She drew in a deep breath and continued up the stairs. A wooden door, mauve paint peeling from it, stood ajar at the top. Amy paused, took another breath, then firmly shoved the door open.

Someone had been living there, all right.

By the door was a small stack of cardboard boxes, full of canned food. Further along the wall opposite the windows overlooking the warehouse was a messy pile of bedding, a sleeping bag and a number of stained, grubby blankets on top of a rather damp-looking mattress. A dented paraffin heater—Amy guessed it was the one that had been in the hut on the dock—stood next to the bed. On a small table under the windows was a camping stove with a grimy pan sitting on top of it, and a large spiral-bound notebook. At the other end of the room...

"I've seen that," Jack said softly as he advanced into the office behind Amy. "It was in my vision. I've seen it before."

It was a circular table, about five feet across, crude saw marks around its edge showing where a larger piece of wood had been cut to shape. Marked on it in blood-red paint was a five-pointed star.

Jack moved closer to the table, each step bringing back a flash of memory from his vision. The table had looked exactly like this at first, then there had been something else on it, dark pools at each point of the star, another, larger one in the center...

"Look at this." Amy was aiming her light at the notebook, gingerly opening the cover with the tip of a pen that she'd taken from her pocket. "I think it's his diary."

As disturbing as the sight of the table was, Jack suspected it would be preferable to the contents of the diary. But he joined Amy anyway. "What does it say?"

"By reading and understanding these words with the benefit of history, future generations shall revere me as a prophet and savior...' Not a promising start," Amy muttered. She was normally a very fast reader, but the spidery handwriting was a struggle to decipher. "Rant, rant, hard done by, New York's a corrupt and sinful place—well, duh..." She turned the page, starting to read more quickly as she grew accustomed to the handwriting. "Okay, well, like a lot of nut-jobs, he's a complete egotist. Most of this is about him." She flicked through a few more pages. "More pseudo-religious ranting about sin and corruption... the young have no morals... each successive generation sinking deeper into the pit of carnality..."

"How much has he written?" Jack asked. Amy probed further into the book, finding blank pages before too long.

"Not all that much, actually. Funny, I always thought these kinds of people wrote whole volumes."

"Maybe he was planning to," said Jack. "After he'd actually *started* what he was planning. What's the last thing he wrote?"

Amy flicked back. "Here we go... 'The five are chosen. I have found all their homes, their lairs of iniquity. They will not expect me, for they believe they are safe in their loathsome dens, paid for by their corruption and sin, but I shall take them all. The senses of the city will become mine, to be cleansed and purified, so that the shroud of sin that has tainted them and all those who idolize them will be lifted, and all will see the truth...' " She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Sheesh. The guy really *was* a psycho. Hello, Bellevue!"

Jack ignored her, moving back to the circular table. "Five people... five senses." He whirled, suddenly hit by the meaning of what he'd seen in his vision. "I know what it means—what he was after! I saw it!"

"What do you mean?" Amy left the book and joined him at the table, examining the painted star. "God, I hope that's not blood he's used to paint that."

"I don't think so, but there was definitely supposed to be blood on there *after* he'd done his job. Look." Jack indicated each point of the star. "Five points. Five senses—sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste." He pointed back at the notebook. "Five people chosen. And I saw in my vision what he wanted with them, what he was going to take from them." He jabbed a finger at each point of the star as he spoke. "Eyes. Nose. Hands. Ears. Tongue. He was going to kill them and cut out parts of their bodies for... for God knows what, the sick bastard." He looked at the middle of the star. Something else there, something else in a pool of oozing blood... "And there was someone else, a sixth victim. But I don't know who that was or what he wanted from them."

Amy went back to the book and quickly continued reading. "I think I've found it. 'And the sixth shall be revealed through the taking of the five, and when I have taken the sixth, the purification will begin. Before Artemis closes her eye, it shall be done, and this city of sin shall see again through cleansed eyes, shall smell again through cleansed nostrils, shall feel again with...' You get the idea." Her brow furrowed in thought. "Artemis is the goddess of the moon... and there's a full moon at the moment."

Jack's eyes flickered involuntarily up towards the ceiling, as if trying to catch sight of the moon overhead. "Yeah?"

"It's a regular departmental warning. Crazies seem to come out to play more when there's a full moon. Maybe this guy was planning to do all his work before the full moon ends."

"Great, a psycho with a work ethic and a time clock." They exchanged amused glances. "Nothing else about the sixth victim?"

"Nope." She looked back at Jack. "A sixth victim... a sixth sense? Maybe he was planning to kill Haley Joel Osment."

"That's not funny," Jack said, turning back to face the table.

"Sorry. Cop humor, it tends to be kind of gallows."

"He was going to start with the eyes," mused Jack, slowly walking in a circle around the table. "Chelsea Cox's eyes... and that's how she

died, through her eyes. But why her? Why did he choose her in the first place?"

Amy was already using her pen to turn back the pages of the book. "Hold on, I thought I saw something about eyes in here somewhere... Here. 'The eyes of the city are full of the corruption and decadence of youth, fixated upon only the most base and vile things, reveling not in beauty and love but in death and violence and pain. And through these hateful eyes, all other eyes that see are infected with the same sickness, for they worship infamy above all else and seek to mimic it...' yadda yadda, '...she will thank me with her dying breath as I take the eyes that have poisoned and corrupted her, and through her all the others who see the city through her eyes, and without those eyes she will finally see the truth...' " She shook her head. "Christ. Why do people with a God complex always write like pretentious teenagers? Why can't he just say 'She's a TV reporter who covers bad things for good ratings, so I'm going to kill her?'"

"You got that from *that*?" Jack asked.

"Didn't you?"

Jack gave her an apologetic shrug. "I was too busy with underage drinking and chasing girls when I was a teenager to be pretentious."

"Oh, a jock, huh?" Amy grinned.

"Afraid so."

"Well, I was hard-working and a straight-A student. Okay, A and B. *And* I kept a diary, which is always a pretty pretentious thing to do, so I guess that made the translation easier. Okay, what else?" She flicked through the pages again. "More of the same, really, just with a different person and a different sense in each rant."

"Does it say who they are?"

"Not that I can see. I suppose he already knew who he was after in his twisted little mind, so he didn't feel the need to put it down on paper. Plus, maybe he was smart enough not to leave concrete evidence about his intended victims in case he got caught before he could kill them."

Jack finished his slow circuit of the table and stood next to Amy, examining the book. "Is there anything there that might be a clue to who they are?"

"Only if you can decipher this lot." Amy turned to various pages. "'Gripped by the greed of youth, he has filled the streets of the city with filth, the choking stench rising all around even as he profits from this uncleanness...' 'In God's name she reaches out, grasping at others and infecting them with her debased and diseased teachings, even as she takes their money and uses it to further the spread of her vile untruths...'"

"Has a way with words, doesn't he?" Jack said, frowning.

"A sick way. 'An assault on the ears and on the mind, the foulest immoralities and obscenities masquerading as song, dripping poison into the ears of the impressionable young and dragging them away from the one path, their one chance, of salvation...' Where's number five, number five... Here. 'She has perverted a simple God-given pleasure into wanton lust, inflaming all those who follow her examples with associations of carnal desires. The simple act of taking sustenance is twisted into an orgy of temptation. I shall protect those who are less strong by claiming the taste of the temptress...' Well." Amy closed the book, repulsed. "He was certainly a man with a plan."

"Was there anything about the sixth victim at all?"

"Nothing I could see," Amy told him. "There might be something else in there hidden away, but I think we should leave that up to the rest of the department now. Let them read the damn thing. I'm going to call this in, get forensics to see if the fingerprints in here match the John Doe in the morgue. I kind of get the feeling they will."

Jack thrust his hands deep into his pockets, trying to remember whether or not he'd touched anything and possibly left any fingerprints. He didn't think he had, but the last thing he wanted was for some cop to find one of his prints in the lair of a wannabe serial killer and for him to have to explain how it got there. "How are you going to explain to them how you found out about this place? How you got in?"

"I'll think of something. Maybe that whole 'concussion insanity' thing will work after all."

Something was troubling Jack, a thought gnawing away inside his mind. There was an odd familiarity to the passages Amy had just read out. What was it?

It wasn't from his vision, but somewhere else. And it was just out of his reach, tantalizingly close but not quite touchable...

Amy read his troubled expression. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know," Jack said. "It's like... I don't know, it's like I've forgotten something. It's almost there, but I can't quite put my finger on it."

"About your vision? The dead guy?"

"I don't know! Something... When you were reading from the book just now, there was something about what you were saying, but..." He clenched his fists in frustration. "Shit! I don't know. I can't remember what it was!"

Amy touched him lightly on the arm. "Look, don't worry about it."

"No, it's something about the other people he was going to kill, something about the order... Fuck! I can't think of what it is, but I know it means something!"

"Jack!" Amy didn't have to tell him to calm down and get a grip on himself; it was all in her voice. "If it's important, it'll come back to you, okay? Here's what we'll do. I'm going to call this in, get a team up here to check the place out, see if there's anything else here. I'll wait for them to arrive. *You*, meanwhile, you are going to go to that diner we passed on the way over and get something to eat while you wait for me there." She handed him some bills; twenty-five dollars in all. "Here. Get some food, grab a coffee, whatever, sit down, think about what you were trying to remember. I've got my cellphone—here's the number." She scribbled down the number on the back of a card, then handed it and some coins to him. "Give me a call if you think of anything. I'll come and find you once I'm done here... however long that might take to explain."

Jack put the money and card into his pocket. "I hope you can come up with something good."

"God, so do I!" Amy patted his arm again. "Okay, now get going."

The diner wasn't exactly the nicest place Jack had ever eaten, but unlike the one he'd visited with Amy earlier in the day, the staff

didn't seem to be bothered by his appearance. As long as he had the money to pay for his order, he doubted they could care less who walked through their door.

He sat at a booth near the back of the diner, slowly working his way through a hamburger, fries and two eggs. Healthy it wasn't; filling and tasty it most certainly was. A television mounted on the wall behind the counter, which Jack suspected was there more for the benefit of the waitresses than the customers, was showing a daytime soap, which so far in the course of his meal had shown three family arguments, one business deal ruined by backstabbing, one illicit affair, two fights, one woman thrown down a flight of stairs and one person learning they had a terminal disease. Jack felt as though he needed a scorecard.

He'd often mocked Jennifer for her love of the soaps, even though she knew as well as he did how ridiculous they were. There had been more crammed into the last twenty-odd minutes than most people's lives had in a year.

Apart from the fights, though. There had been a lot of those in their last year together. He tried to remember when the fights had really started in earnest. Had it been before the trial, or after? He *wanted* to think that it was after, but had the nasty feeling that things had started going bad before then. Some time before then. Right after the accident.

That wasn't what he wanted to think about. He shouldn't be thinking about it, not now that he had a job to do. He had to work out who the John Doe had planned to kill after Chelsea Cox, and warn them that even though their intended killer may be dead, they were still in danger.

But how was he supposed to do that? All he had to go on were the hints in the dead man's notebook, garbled ravings from the mind of a psychopath. They weren't enough to go by on their own. He needed more... and he was certain he had it, but whatever the knowledge was, it was frustratingly just beyond his reach.

What was it Bill had told him at the morgue? Watch for the signs? He could use a sign right about now...

The television caught his attention. The soap had apparently ended, going to a news bulletin. Somebody had just said Chelsea Cox's name. On the screen, a newscaster with a solemn expression was talking, a carefully posed publicity photo of Chelsea superimposed over the newsroom background above his shoulder. "...award-winning reporter was tragically killed today in an accident while reporting on a story. Cameraman Brad Fry filmed her final report just hours ago. Some viewers may find this footage disturbing."

Jack had an odd feeling of disassociation from reality when he saw himself on the TV, the picture shaking as it zoomed in. Lonnie was still facing out from the building, but the other Jack was standing right against the parapet wall. It could only be seconds before Lonnie slipped.

"Reporting on an attempted suicide in downtown Manhattan," the newscaster said, "Chelsea and her cameraman were able to capture these terrifying pictures of a friend of the man attempting to talk him back to safety." Jack saw himself reach out his hand, Lonnie looking back over his shoulder and hesitantly reaching back for it...

Even though he knew what was about to happen, Jack found that he was holding his breath.

Recorded audio replaced the smooth tones of the newscaster, the sound of the crowd on the street.

Their hands met, closed. Lonnie started to turn around...

Something shimmered near the bottom of the screen. Camera glitch, frost blown up by a passing wind, impossible heat haze—whatever it was, it passed by Lonnie's feet and was gone in the blink of an eye.

Lonnie slipped.

Jack drew in a sharp breath through his nose, realizing that he wasn't the only person in the diner who had done so. The waitresses were all watching the TV, transfixed.

On the screen, Jack saw himself slammed against the parapet by Lonnie's weight as he fell. "Whoa!" yelled a female voice; Chelsea's. People in the crowd screamed and gasped. Lonnie kicked in panic, desperate to find a foothold. Then he fell.

A shrill bleep covered up whatever Chelsea said next. The camera tracked Lonnie's fall, a solid black shape against the sudden blur of the brickwork behind him. Then abruptly he vanished, the camera's view showing nothing but an empty sidewalk before the picture zoomed back out, the back of Chelsea's head filling one side of the screen. On the other side, Jack could see Lonnie hanging impossibly in the air, his coat stretching up above him. Then he fell again.

Chelsea whirled on the camera, her expression a mixture of awe and delight. Lonnie hit the sidewalk in the background. "Did you get that?" she asked.

Then came a sharp cracking sound. Chelsea looked up—
The picture froze.

"Those were her final words," the newscaster cut in grimly. "The phone wire that saved the man's life was, in a terrible coincidence, the cause of her death. Ice from a broken water pipe that had built up on the wire was dislodged..."

But Jack had stopped hearing the words. Instead, he stared at Chelsea's frozen face on the TV screen.

He knew what the sign was.

Abandoning his food, he hurriedly pulled the card Amy had given him from his pocket, and scrambled for the payphone at the back of the diner.

"This is it, this is it," Jack yelled at the taxi driver. "Pull over here!"

Amy looked out at the darkened street. It had taken her quite some time to deal with the department after summoning them to the abandoned warehouse, and she had the horrible feeling that she was going to be facing some extremely hard-to-answer questions from her superiors before long. "This is the street where..."

"I know," Jack said, throwing open the door of the cab and jumping out. In front of him was the alley, strands of broken police warning tape flapping in the wind.

Amy paid the driver and followed him out into the cold. The sight of the alley stirred up unpleasant memories that she'd been too

occupied for most of the day to think about. "What are we doing here?"

"The signs," Jack told her, getting a dubious look in return. "Bill said we had to watch out for the signs! Well, I saw them last night, and I didn't even know it. That's what's been bothering me all day. Come on."

He set off down the street, retracing his path from the previous night after he'd left the psycho in the alley. Amy followed him through the snow, uncertain what he was on about. None of his excited explanations during the cab ride had made much sense to her. She wondered how many cups of coffee he'd had at the diner before calling her.

"I came out of the alley," Jack said, "and went this way, in kind of a hurry. I saw you in your cop car a bit further along—you'd slowed right down as you went past."

"Oh, yeah," Amy remembered. "Pete thought you looked suspicious. Wait, you actually remembered seeing me?"

"You stuck in my mind," admitted Jack. "I thought you were... cute."

"Really? Oh, well." Amy tried to hold down the little flutter of pleasure she got from the description. "You know, I don't often get that when I'm in my full uniform and everything."

"What can I say? But it's why I remembered you." Jack continued his rapid walk along the street, Amy almost having to break into a jog to keep up. Ahead, he could see a flickering glow from a store window. Television light. "There. That's it."

He came to stop outside the window. The televisions were still on, still tuned to the same channel. Chelsea's frozen face was on them again, a repeat of the story Jack had watched in the diner.

"I saw her," he said, pointing at the screens. "After I saw you go past, I saw Chelsea doing a story on these TVs here. And then, and then," he continued, hurrying further along the street and standing over a pile of spilled trash in the gutter, "there was a garbage truck here, loading up and doing a real messy job of it."

Amy folded her arms and looked at him skeptically. "That's a sign? If that's the case, then the whole of New York's one big sign."

"'He has filled the streets with filth,' or whatever it was it said in that book," said Jack. "There was a name on the side of the truck, can't remember what it was, but I do remember thinking I wouldn't want to work for them if I had the choice."

"I dunno, Jack," Amy told him, "it seems a bit thin."

"Okay, come on, check this out." He hurried along the sidewalk again, Amy sighing before setting off after him. Before long, they reached the intersection at the end of the block. "There." He pointed up at the sign opposite.

"'See the light and feel the love of the Lord,'" Amy read. "Hey, I've seen her on TV. When I was channel surfing," she quickly added. "I don't think I've ever been bored enough to watch a show like that. Hey, didn't she used to be in a sitcom?"

"Didn't the book say something like 'In God's name she reaches out?'" Jack asked. "And there was something about healing as well, wasn't there?"

Amy read the next line on the poster. "So what are you saying, that this Katie Astin was going to be our John Doe's second victim?"

"Third," corrected Jack. "The second victim was going to be the garbage man. Well, not *the* garbage man, but whoever owns the company. Donovan, something like that."

"Donahue?" said Amy.

"Yeah, that was it." He saw Amy's expression change. "What?"

"You haven't heard of Dawson Donahue?"

"I've been kind of out of the loop for the last couple of years," Jack reminded her. "I've been sleeping under newspapers, not reading them. No, I haven't. Why, who is he?"

"He's a businessman, kind of famous—or infamous, maybe. A sort of business whiz-kid. He won a big contract to handle the city's garbage about a year ago," Amy explained. "There was a lot of controversy about it, allegations of bribery, City Hall corruption, that sort of thing. Plus there's always been rumors that the Mob's been heavily involved in that kind of thing, and they were pissed when he won the contract. And he's one of these 'longer hours for less pay, and if you don't like it you're fired' kind of bosses. It's how he was able to undercut the rival bidders."

"Sounds like a great guy," Jack noted sourly. "Just like my old bosses."

"It made him a millionaire," Amy said. "He took over his dad's company and turned the whole place around in just a couple of years, and got him a lot of press into the bargain. The guy's a total publicity whore. Which... I guess might have put him in the sights of our dead psycho. He's young, he's in the public eye... and his line of business stinks up the place."

Jack looked down at the garbage festering in the gutter. "Especially if he doesn't bother cleaning up after himself."

"You know," Amy said slowly, as if trying to convince herself, "this signs business of yours might have something to it."

"Chelsea *was* the eyes of the city," said Jack. "This Donovan—"

"Donahue."

"—Donahue guy certainly leaves a smell in the streets, and Miss Touchy-Feely up there might cause offence if you've got your own very set idea about what God's will is."

"Eyes, nose, hands," Amy said, counting them off on her fingers. "So what about, ah... taste and hearing?"

"Taste's in that bookshop window over there." Jack pointed across the intersection and down the street opposite. "It's coming back to me now. Come on, I'll show you." He stopped suddenly at the curb. "Shit! Hearing, it was right here. 'An assault on the ears,' right? I almost got hit by an SUV full of suburban kids listening to rap music."

"What kind of rap?"

"How the hell should I know? How many kinds are there?"

"Plenty. One of my little brothers is into gangsta." She caught his puzzled look. "I know, I know, Chinese kid listening to rap music. He does it to annoy me 'cause I'm a cop, okay?"

"All these kids were white," Jack said. "But yeah, it'd annoy their parents."

"What was in the song?"

"Can't really remember, but it was one of those kinds of songs with lots of 'bitches' and 'motherfuckers.' 'Scuse my language."

Amy snorted. "Hah! I get called both of those all the time. Sometimes in the same sentence."

"You crack their heads?"

"It's tempting. Remember anything else about the song?"

Jack thought back. "Lots of guns and drugs and 'hos, as well."

"I know exactly the kind of thing," said Amy. "But it's not like there's a shortage of that stuff around. Unless you know what the song was, it doesn't help us much."

"Sorry. I haven't been listening to much music recently."

"Okay, well, if victim number four was meant to be some rapper or other, that's a start. What about number five?"

Jack led Amy across the street and down the next block, stopping outside the bookshop. "There you go."

Amy's eyes widened. "Hey, I've got a couple of her books," she said as she saw Dominique Swann's latest. "She's good. Not that I've got much time to do any fancy cooking, but the recipes sound nice."

Jack gestured at the cover, with its cream-dripping strawberry being raised to a red-lipsticked and smiling mouth. "That look like sustenance turning into an orgy of temptation to you?"

"You have a point. And she is on TV quite a lot. *And* she lives in New York."

"Five senses," said Jack, "five people. And one of them's dead already."

"Six people," Amy reminded him.

"Yeah, but I didn't see any sign about a sixth person," Jack said. "I only got a bit further up the street when I had the vision."

"Where?"

"What does it matter?"

Amy started walking. "Maybe you saw something and didn't pick up on it. Come on, show me."

"Okay, okay." Jack followed her the short distance to the adult bookstore. "It was right around here." He looked around for anything that might suggest a final victim, but there was nothing. "I don't remember anything else."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

Amy examined the area, wondering if Jack had missed some clue, but there was nothing in the window of the adult bookstore but some sort of ageing reflective foil, blocking any sight of the shop's contents from passers-by. A dull, blurry copy of herself looked morosely back at her. "I guess we'll have to stick with five, then," she said, turning back to Jack. "So, apart from Chelsea Cox, we've got Dawson Donovan, representing smell, that televangelist girl for touch, some rapper for hearing, and Dominique Swann, taste." She gave Jack a look. "Assuming any of this is right, that is."

"If I was hearing it from somebody else, I wouldn't believe it," Jack said. "But I know what I saw in the vision... and the first thing I saw was you. The second thing I saw was Chelsea Cox, and she's dead. But if I could save you, maybe we can save the others now that we know what's going on."

Amy rubbed her head, wincing when she poked at the forgotten bandage on her temple. "Ow. Damn it... You know, before we can save these people, we have to find them first, and *then* get them to believe a single word we're saying." She glanced at her watch. "Jesus, it's after eight already. We're not going to talk to them tonight. We're not even going to *find* them tonight."

Jack looked up at the sky. A dim glow through the clouds told him that the moon was still up there, somewhere. The Eye of Artemis was still open. "But if we—"

"No buts, Jack," Amy told him, very much as a police officer giving an order. "I don't know about you, but I've had a very long, very bad day! I need some rest. And so do you, I bet."

"Okay," Jack reluctantly agreed. "If I get moving, I can make it to the shelter by nine." Amy's eyebrows crinkled. "What?"

"Uh, I don't know how to tell you this, Jack," she said in a guilty tone, "but with all that was going on today, I, uh..."

"Didn't get a chance to call your friend at the shelter and save me a bed?" Jack finished.

"Something like that." Amy bit her lip and gave him an apologetic half-smile.

"Huh."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I got talking to people at the precinct, and then there was the thing with Chelsea, then..." She shook her head. "Look, I'm really sorry. You can stay at my apartment instead, okay?"

Jack was surprised. "You sure?"

"You *did* save my life," Amy said. "I said if there was anything I could do to help you... and giving you somewhere to sleep for the night that isn't out in the open. Or a police cell."

"Thanks," said Jack, after a pause. "That means a lot."

She raised a finger in joking warning. "Let me just get one thing straight, though. You're sleeping on the couch."

SIX

Jack awoke, and for some time had no idea where he was. He was warm, he was dry, and the pillow his head was resting on—a pillow, a rare enough thing in itself!—had a faint floral scent rather than the acrid tang of the industrial-strength detergent used in homeless shelters.

He even felt *clean*. Where was he?

The answers slowly came back to him as he stared at a collection of intertwined shapes next to the couch that gradually resolved themselves into one of Amy's sculptures, a tangle of thick, blackened wires like an exposed skeleton partially clad in thin sheets of copper. A bird of some kind, a tall, long-necked one like a heron or crane. He remembered now. Lifting his head from the pillow, he looked around to find himself in the living room of Amy's apartment.

Jack lay there for a while, reveling in the almost-forgotten pleasure of being comfortable.

He took in the apartment in the soft morning light coming through the drawn curtains. The place was small but comfy, the living room warm and friendly. Amy's tastes in furnishings seemed quite eclectic, but with a definite bias towards the comfortably used. There were more of Amy's wire and metal sculptures dotted around the room, ranging from a few inches tall to a couple of feet. A small craft table in a corner by the window was home to her tools; pliers, hacksaws, wirecutters, even a small brazing torch. It was obviously a hobby that she took seriously.

Eventually, he heard a noise from one of the other rooms. Amy had just got out of bed, judging by the creak of floorboards as she moved around. He pushed the blankets away and sat up. Heh. He'd actually slept naked, something he hadn't risked doing for a very long time indeed. However well organized a shelter was, there was still always the risk that anything not under the blankets with you while you slept would be gone in the morning. He'd learned that lesson the hard way very early on.

But today, his clothes were right where he'd left them, on top of his bag by the foot of the couch. He stared at them. Great. The simple act of having a proper shower the night before had apparently washed some of the dirt from his vision of life, as well. His clothes were filthy.

But they were all he had, and he had the feeling that Amy's generosity might not last much longer if she found him wandering around her home stark naked. He rolled off the couch to stand on the polished floorboards and quickly dressed, suppressing a faint feeling of repulsion as he pulled the dirty material over his clean skin. He'd become so used to the feeling that he'd almost forgotten there was an alternative.

"Morning, Jack," said Amy, coming into the room with her hair tied back and wearing an oversized white toweling dressing gown that made her seem even more petite than usual.

"Uh, hi," he answered, hurriedly fastening his jeans. Amy padded over to the kitchen area behind a counter at the back of the room.

"You want anything? Coffee, toast?"

"Both would be good, thanks."

"Okay." She hummed something under her breath as she started opening cabinets and clattering plates on the counter. Before long, Jack found himself presented with a tray of breakfast.

"You don't have to wait on me, you know," he said.

"Jack, don't be silly. You're my guest." She handed him a knife and a butter dish. "If you want anything else, help yourself. I'm going to have a shower."

"Okay," said Jack, unexpectedly stricken with the thought that he might not have left the shower anywhere near as clean as he'd found it. However, there were no shrieks of disgust from the bathroom, so he took it that his attempt to rinse everything down had been at least partly successful, and munched on his toast as the shower rumbled away.

Somebody knocked loudly on the apartment's door, making him jump. "Can you get that?" Amy called. Jack went to the door, puzzling over three completely different kinds of lock before opening it.

Beriev was standing on the other side.

If nothing else, the way his expectant smile changed to an expression of utter shock and dismay made Jack's morning.

"The- Wha- The *fuck* are *you* doing here?" he spluttered.

"Good morning, Officer Beriev," said Jack with exaggerated politeness. "Anything I can do for you?"

Beriev's surprise had changed to barely restrained rage. "Where's Amy?" he asked, dangerously.

"In the shower." Jack knew it might provoke a nasty response, but he couldn't resist. "Shall I tell her you called?" he asked with a slight smile, trying to get a look that suggested "I just had sex" into his eyes.

At least three different expressions fought for dominance on Beriev's hard, and rapidly reddening, face. Utter loathing won out as he shoved the door open and barged past Jack into the apartment. "Amy! *Amy!*" he yelled.

"Pete? I'm in the shower."

"What's this—*guy* doing here?" Beriev demanded, standing outside the bathroom door and almost pressing his face against it as he spoke.

"Pete? Hello? I'm *in the shower!*" Amy's annoyance was only a fraction of Beriev's, but it was still clear. "Sit down and wait, okay? I'll be a few minutes."

Making a bear-like growling sound deep in his throat, Beriev reluctantly sat down in an armchair in one corner. It was obvious that he normally expected to sit on the couch, but Jack had already returned to his breakfast.

"Toast?" he asked innocently, holding up a slice. Beriev scowled at him.

Amy emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, rubbing at her damp hair with a towel. "Hey, Pete."

Beriev stood up, straightening his uniform. "Amy. You okay?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?" She sat down on the only remaining seat, next to Jack on the couch. Beriev's irritation grew, but he forced it out of his voice.

"I just heard you had a busy day yesterday, after you left me," he said, trying to sound casual.

"I got around," Amy told him, finishing with her hair and putting down the towel.

"Found where that psycho had been living." Beriev's gaze flicked over just about everything in the room except for Amy's eyes. "Fingerprints matched, from what I heard. What, you, ha-ha, planning on becoming a detective?"

"Maybe." Amy picked up a slice of toast from the tray and took a noisy bite.

"You wanna tell me how you did it?" Tension was rising in Beriev's tone.

Amy stared at him, growing annoyed herself at his inability to look her in the eye. "I'm going to put it all in my official report. When I go back on duty."

"Back on duty. Right." Beriev ground his teeth for a moment, then jumped up from the chair. "God damn it, Amy!" he exploded, finally looking right at her. "You carry on like this, they won't *let* you back on duty!"

Amy stood herself, facing up against the much larger man with equal determination. "Carry on like *what*, Pete? Huh?"

"Unauthorized investigations!" Beriev yelled. "Entering without a warrant!" His angry gaze burned over Jack for an instant. "Hanging around with... with this guy!"

"Oh, I *see*!" Amy said coldly. "That's what you're so pissed off about! Never mind that I came out of hospital after being attacked yesterday, or that I saw a woman die right in front of me—I spent a day with a man who wasn't you! What's the matter, Pete—you jealous?"

"No, that's... that's not true!" Beriev replied, flustered. He pointed a stubby finger at Jack. "This guy's bad news, Amy, he's bad news! You should be keeping as far away from him as you can—but you invite him into your fuckin' *home*!"

Amy stepped back, crossing her arms. "You done, Pete?"

"No, dammit!" Beriev's voice took on almost a pleading tone. "Listen, Amy! One of the guys on the detective squad told me what

you'd said to them about how you found that warehouse. It doesn't stand up, Amy, it doesn't stand up. They're gonna want to know how you *really* found it, and if you did anything that wasn't above board, they're gonna find out. That'll be it, your career'll be over, at twenty-four. Is that what you want?"

"Of course it isn't," Amy told him, subdued.

"So tell me! I might be able to help! I've been on the force for a long time, I know the right people to talk to. I can help you with this..." He gave Jack another venomous look. "...but not if you stick around with someone who's just gonna get you into more trouble!"

Amy stood silently for several seconds. "Okay, Pete, thanks for that," she eventually said, voice flat. "I'll take it under advisement. And now, if you'll get out, I'd like to get dressed."

"What?" Beriev said in disbelief.

Amy pointed angrily at the door. "Get out, Pete. Get out!"

"Amy!" protested Beriev.

"Get! *Out!*"

For a moment it seemed as though Beriev was going to erupt in anger, then, every muscle tensed and his face turning red with rage, he turned and walked out, slamming the door behind him. Amy, shaking with fury herself, rushed back into her bedroom, leaving Jack alone and awkward in the living room. Not sure what to do, and deciding that any attempt to talk to Amy until she was ready would only make matters worse, he decided to play things safe and finish his breakfast.

Amy didn't reappear for more than twenty minutes, by which time she was fully dressed and, Jack registered, made up. Her face was still stony, though she managed to give him a not very convincing smile when she saw that he was doing the washing-up for her.

Jack didn't really know what to say, so waited for her to make the first move. But she was still wound up, pacing silently back and forth. "Sorry about that," Amy said at last.

"You've got nothing to apologize for," he answered.

"Pete's not normally like that," she said in reply to the unspoken words. "Really. The only time I've ever seen him wound up like that was when..." She paused. Jack gave her a questioning look. "It

doesn't matter, it's his business. But I just think that he's feeling guilty about not being there when I got attacked the other night, and he's... over-compensating."

Jack made a grunt of general agreement, not wanting to air his own opinions of Beriev to her just yet. "So," he said, drying the last plate and standing it in the rack by the sink, "about today. How are we going to go about it? Do both of us go and find these people together to try and make it easier to convince them, or do we split up to cover more ground?"

Amy sat down, looking at her hands. "Um... I was thinking about this for most of the night," she said in a voice that had suddenly gone very small. Jack moved out from behind the kitchen counter and crouched in front of her.

"And...?"

"And... What Pete said was something I'd been worrying about all night anyway. You know, I *am* gonna get asked a lot of questions about how I found out about the warehouse, and there's going to be no point lying about what happened—one, because eventually they'll find out anyway, and two, because... because I can't think of any explanation that sounds even remotely plausible."

"So tell them the truth," said Jack. "Tell them it was me."

"Yeah. Right." She clapped her hands together, interlocking her fingers. "A homeless guy had a vision, and I believed him. Y'know, I don't think the NYPD has much of a policy on psychics."

Jack saw where the conversation was going. "So you're not going to..."

Amy looked up from her hands, a resigned expression on her face. "What am I going to say, Jack? 'While I was off duty, I visited a bunch of public figures and told them that they'd been chosen as targets by a serial killer who's now dead, but they shouldn't relax because they're on death's list and they're going to die some other way instead?' They wouldn't just kick me off the force, they'd probably lock me up!"

"Right." Jack stood up, Amy avoiding his eyes. "So... I guess I'm going to have to do this on my own."

"Jack, look," she said, "I do believe it—and I believe *you*. I've seen too much not to. But if I get involved any more and go around *telling* people that I believe you, then that'll be the end of my career, and... and I don't want that to happen. But I *will* help you," she added, standing up and facing Jack. "Okay? I'll help you find out where all these people actually are, and I'll give you some money."

"I don't need any money," Jack insisted.

"Jack." Amy's voice became forceful, matter-of-fact. "You *do* need money. These people that we're trying to find are either rich, or famous, or both. You're not even going to get through the door looking like that."

Jack looked down at his clothes. "You mean filthy, torn jeans aren't fashionable any more?"

Amy smiled, a genuine one this time. "Only with skateboarders. Listen, you go and have a shower while I go to the ATM. Then we'll go and get you some new clothes, so you'll have a chance of getting near these people without having security throw you out onto the street. Then I'll make a few calls and find out where they all are. That sound fair?"

"I suppose..." Jack reluctantly agreed.

"Good." She looked at his face, cocking her head at an angle as she examined it. "And you know what else we can get you?"

"What?"

She grinned. "A razor."

Despite his misgivings, Jack had to admit that Amy had been right as he looked at himself in her full-length bedroom mirror. The clothes he was now wearing weren't exactly Armani, but they were a long way from the unwashed, weather-beaten layers he'd been wearing day in, day out for months. Even though it was just a simple blue shirt, black trousers and shoes, the difference from what he had become used to was so great he could hardly recognize himself.

The same went for his face. Gone was the unkempt, scraggly beard, and after he'd shaved that off Amy had gone one step further and

actually given him a haircut, explaining that she used to be the family barber for her father and brothers. No more stringy, shoulder-length hair; he now had a cut that looked somewhat stylish, even if his ideas of style were probably years out of date. Whatever; she'd done a pretty good job.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he still looked like a homeless guy who'd somehow got lucky and found a new set of clothes, though. He couldn't work out why, until he spotted what was troubling him. It was his skin—no matter how much he cleaned it, he wasn't going to be able to wash away the street-roughened texture from his hands and cheeks, the elemental ageing around his eyes. It had been over two years since he'd been forced out of his last small, crummy apartment—from his face, he thought it looked more like ten.

"You decent?" Amy called from the living room. When Jack answered yes, she came in. "Wow," she said, walking in a circle around him and looking him up and down. "You know, you don't look at all bad. You scrub up pretty well."

"Thanks," he said, still examining his face in the mirror. "God, my face really took a pounding, though. I hadn't realized how old I look."

"What are you talking about?" Amy stood next to him, looking at his reflection. "You don't look a day over thirty."

Jack's mouth dropped open. "That's 'cause I'm twenty-eight!" he complained.

"Ooh. Heh. Sorry. You look great! Really." Amy took his arm and led him back into the living room. "Anyway, I made a couple of calls, called in a couple of favors." She picked up a sheet of paper from the table and handed it to Jack. "I got the addresses you need."

Jack looked at the list. Dawson Donahue, Katie Astin, Dominique Swann. "They're even in the right order."

"I'm efficient like that," Amy smiled. "No joy on your mystery rapper, but until you remember the song you heard, there's not much I can do."

"You've already done plenty," Jack told her. "Thanks."

"No problem for my... white knight." She took his hand and squeezed it. "Come on. I'll give you a ride to the first one."

The exciting thing about being in business, Dawson Donahue mused, was that there were always surprises. No matter how much you planned, how many contingencies you had covered, there was always room for the unexpected.

And that, to him, was what set him apart from the rest, what had made him a millionaire ten times over by twenty-six and already on course to double that within the next two years. Any monkey could sit down and make plans. It was being able to react quickly and decisively to the *unplanned* that was the mark of a true businessman, to take the unforeseen and figure out how to turn it into an opportunity there on the spot. He'd done it many times already, and he intended to go on doing it for a very long time indeed.

That said, this particular piece of unexpectedness was something from which he couldn't see any way to profit. The man in the reception area wasn't, his security staff had assured him, some kind of Mafia hitman or disgruntled ex-employee here with a grudge and a concealed weapon to blow him away. But he'd apparently been sitting waiting for him in reception since the morning, even though he knew that the receptionists would have told him that Mr Donahue was a very busy man and would not be available without a prior appointment. He knew that because he'd made it standard policy a while back, after a disgruntled ex-employee with a grudge—though thankfully not a concealed weapon—had showed up one day and taken a swing at him.

He wondered what story the man had spun to convince the receptionists and security to let him sit around on the not exactly luxurious chairs for what must now have been a good four hours. Probably said that he was after a job.

That did at least show a certain tenacity, which was always a good thing when you needed workers to be able to stick things out under tough conditions. But as Dawson watched the man through the glass door to reception, briefly held up on his way out by an assistant who needed his signature, he got the feeling that the man wasn't here to

ask for a job hauling garbage. Sure, all his clothes looked new as if freshly bought for an interview, and his cheap haircut was probably no more than a day old, but there was something about him that set off little warning signals in Dawson's head. Nothing major—if there had been, the man would already have been picked up by security and literally thrown out onto the street—but there was an air of urgency about him that suggested he had something on his mind other than finding work.

The assistant's paperwork signed, Dawson took a breath and prepared to step out into reception. He'd been told some time ago between meetings that the man was there and asked if he wanted him removed, but Dawson hadn't even cared enough to get rid of him, assuming that his uninvited visitor would eventually get bored and leave. Now, though, he was going to have to face him. It wasn't as though he could even sneak by unnoticed—the four-foot-tall studio portrait of himself on the wall behind the reception desk, along with the framed New York business magazine covers on which he'd featured over the last couple of years, meant that only a blind man could fail to recognize him on the way out of the building. He could always go out the back way, through the truck yard, but...

To hell with it. He wasn't going to be freaked out in his own offices by some loser desperate enough to hang around in the reception area for the best part of a day.

He opened the door and stepped through it. The man glanced at him, did a quick double-take between him and the pictures on the wall, then quickly stood and walked towards him.

"Mr Donahue?" he asked.

"That's right," Dawson said, aiming himself at the door and slowing down without actually stopping. "If you're here about a job, just fill out the form like the ladies there asked you to, I don't hire people directly." Not low-level garbage men, anyway.

"I'm not here for a job," the man told him. "I need to talk to you urgently."

Make it quick," said Dawson. "I've got a tennis match in one hour and the big game when I get home, and I've got no intention of being late for either of them."

The man tried slowing his pace, and when that failed to hold up Dawson, started walking backwards alongside him. "Mr Donahue, this is really important, and it's vital you listen to me. Your life is in danger."

That made Dawson stop. "What?"

"Your life's in danger."

"Is that a *threat*?" Dawson demanded, raising his voice enough for the security guards near the door to hear. They perked up immediately, keen to break the monotony of their job by kicking somebody's ass. "Are you threatening me?"

"What?" The man looked genuinely shocked, which was reassuring, at least. "No! No, no, not at all! The opposite, I'm trying to help you! Listen," he said, leaning closer and lowering his voice, "my name's Jack Curtis. You don't know me, I'm nobody, and until today I didn't know who you were."

"I'll have to fire my publicist," Dawson said, not sure where this was going.

Curtis blinked, as if not quite registering the joke. "Somebody else *did* know you, though, and he was planning to kill you."

Now Dawson saw where this was going. Hints of a death threat, assurances of knowledge of the killer's identity—and a subtle but definite demand for money to reveal the information. It wasn't the first one he'd had. "I see," he said, glancing over in the direction of the guards and subtly gesturing for them to come over to him. "And this guy's coming after me, right?"

"Well, no, he's dead."

Dawson waved the security guards to a stop. "Hold on. You're telling me my life's in danger... from a *dead guy*? What is he, a zombie?" Clearly the reason this Curtis was prepared to wait around for hours just to talk to him was that he was *insane*.

"No!" Curtis protested, starting to get visibly frustrated. "You don't understand. This guy, the dead guy, he was planning to kill a bunch of people—"

"Why?" Dawson interrupted.

"Because he was a psycho!"

"I see." The joke was now over, and if he didn't set off soon, he was going to be late for his game. Well, this little encounter would serve as a reminder of the need for punctuality in future. "Okay, guy wanted me dead, now *he's* dead, end of problem. I've got to go." He took a step, only to have Curtis move in front of him, eyes wide.

"No, it's not the end, it's just the beginning!" Dawson's look summoned the security men. "The first person on his list, Chelsea Cox—"

"The chick on TV?"

"Yeah, her, she was on his list, and she died yesterday!"

Dawson frowned, waiting for the two men to flank Curtis. "Yeah? Pity, she was hot. Guys? Get this asshole out of here. If he tries to follow me to my car, call the police."

Curtis looked at the men next to him. He was tall, but the security men were *big*, and knowing he was beaten, he backed towards the door. "You were next on the list!" he cried. "It'll seem like an accident, but it won't be! You've got to be careful! Anything could kill —"

The doors closed, muffling his voice. The two security guards ushered him out of sight down the street.

"I'm so, so sorry about that, Mr Donahue!" wailed one of the receptionists, a pretty brunette whom Dawson had on occasion idly fantasized about screwing. "I had no idea he was going to go wacko like that, I thought he just wanted to talk to you about a job!"

"That's why we have a human resources department," Dawson snapped back. He briefly considered talking to it about replacing her, but the crushed look on her face was enough punishment, he decided. She was doing a perfectly good job, after all, and it was the actual labourers, not the office staff, who needed to be reminded who was boss on a regular basis. "Anyway," he added, voice softening, "no harm done, right?"

"No, Mr Donahue," the girl said, relieved. Maybe he'd get a shot at her after all. "Are you going to be back in today?"

"No, won't be back until tomorrow, so take my calls. I'm going to enjoy a nice, relaxing, nutjob-free game of tennis. Unless," he said

with a smirk as he headed for the door, "I have some kind of accident..."

The two security guards hadn't actually touched him, but they'd made it perfectly clear to Jack that they didn't want him heading back in the direction of the Donahue offices, escorting him a few dozen yards down the street before going back and standing menacingly outside the doors. When Donahue himself emerged and headed down the street in the opposite direction, one of the guards followed him, while the other stayed on the door, glaring at Jack as if daring him to try and follow.

Shit! No wonder Amy had been so reluctant to get involved. Thinking about it now, he *had* sounded like a lunatic, some crazy-eyed fool of the kind that accosted people on the street with prophecies of doom. The kind that a few years ago, he would simply have rolled his eyes at—or worse—and pushed past.

He waited in the hope that the guard would turn back and leave his boss alone, but Donahue disappeared into a gap between two nondescript commercial buildings down the street. Jack remembered seeing a parking lot there when Amy dropped him off, the kind where the cars were stacked one above the other and brought down on a hydraulic platform by a valet. He wondered why Donahue didn't park in the yard that ran around two sides of his building, but a quick glance at the noisy and grimy garbage trucks growling around in there suggested a reason.

Besides, if what Amy had told him on the drive uptown about exactly how Donahue had made a fortune from taking out the city's trash were true—by cutting costs (and wages) to the bone, preemptively breaking strikes by sacking union activists and then underbidding the competition—leaving his car around the back of his own offices sounded like a daily invitation for pissed-off workers to "accidentally" back a truck into it or put a garbage can through the windshield. Jack's desire from the other night not to have to work for someone like Donahue had only been increased.

Still, he'd tried. He'd spent half a day waiting around for Donahue, and delivered his warning when he'd finally got to see him. If Donahue didn't pay any attention to it, then that was his problem.

Beeping from a reversing garbage truck echoed around the yard. Jack looked through the chain-link fence, seeing the yawning metal mouth of one of the dozens of trucks slowly lumbering around the yard, a robot dinosaur with an appetite to match. The discolored steel teeth of its compactor flashed a sinister rictus grin at him.

Damn it. His warning hadn't been enough, and Jack felt somehow compelled to keep trying. Donahue might be an arrogant little shit, but if that were a reason for someone to deserve death then Manhattan wouldn't have any more overcrowding problems. The sight of the truck's compactor had reminded him that there were any number of horrible ways Donahue might meet an "accidental" demise, and in his line of work any of them would smell bad.

He had to try again. One eye on the security guard, who was still giving him dirty looks, he crossed the street, heading for the payphone that he'd spotted outside a gas station a short way down the block. Donahue had said that after his tennis game he was going home, and Jack felt sure that Amy could find out where that was. She'd already agreed to drive him to the workplaces of the other potential victims, and maybe she could be persuaded to take him to Donahue's house.

Reaching the payphone, he pulled several quarters and Amy's cellphone number from his pocket, and dialed. She answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Amy? It's Jack."

"Jack! How did it go? I thought you were going to call me after you'd seen Donahue so I could take you to Katie Astin's?"

"I only just got out. He wouldn't see me until now."

"What happened?"

"He didn't believe me."

There was a pause at the other end of the line. "I'm sorry, Jack," Amy eventually said, a clear implication of "just like I expected" evident. "What are you going to do now?"

Jack was about to answer when a screech of tires caught his attention. He looked round to see a sleek Mercedes CLK55 convertible peel out of the parking lot and roar up the street past him, slush splattering from beneath its wheels. Even without a proper look at the driver behind the tinted windows and closed top, Jack knew it was Donahue. The license plate—"GRBAGE"—was something of a giveaway. The car made a sharp turn into the entrance of the gas station and pulled up next to a pump.

"Can you find out Donahue's home address?" he asked, watching as Donahue climbed out of the Mercedes.

"Sure, but—*nooooo*," Amy gasped from the other end of the line. "Jack, no! It's one thing finding out where these people work, but you can't go to their *homes*!"

"He didn't believe me, I've got to try again," Jack argued, still watching Donahue, who was only about ten yards from the payphone, opening the Merc's filler cap and inserting the pump's nozzle. He took something from an inside pocket and lifted it to his mouth. For one horrible moment Jack thought he was about to light a cigarette, but it was just a stick of gum. The discarded silver paper fluttered to the ground at Donahue's feet.

"Jack, I'm not going to take you to these people's houses! Do you have any idea how much trouble I'd get into?"

"Not as much as they will if I *don't* warn them."

The nozzle was now in place and automatically spewing gas into the tank of the car. Donahue looked up and saw Jack watching him from the payphone. His jaw tightened with distaste as he glared at him. Not wanting to seem as though he was following him, Jack turned away, catching a faint reflection of Donahue and his car in the glass side of the booth.

"No, Jack. Listen to me," Amy said insistently. "You warned him, you've done all you can. If they don't believe you, then that's their problem, not yours. You can't start following them around like their personal bodyguard! There's a word for that, Jack—*stalking*."

"It's not the same thing at all," Jack said, already knowing in his heart that any judge he might find himself in front of would disagree. The reflection of Donahue's car seemed to have become a lot darker

while he'd been speaking, but he couldn't work out why. "I just want to—"

An orange flicker in the reflection suddenly blossomed into a huge ball of boiling fire, an explosion erupting from the back of Donahue's car.

Jack whirled in shock, instinctively lifting his hands to cover his face, but there was nothing there. Donahue was still standing by his Mercedes, looking bored as the gas tank filled up.

He turned around again to stare at the reflection. It was the same as when he'd first noticed it, no longer dark.

"Jack?" Amy asked as he looked back at Donahue. Still there, still bored. Then he flinched, frowned, and reached into his jacket. He took out a cellphone. With a casual, practised flick of the thumb, he flicked it open. "Jack, are you there?"

"His car," Jack realized with horror. "Jesus Christ! His car's going to explode!"

He rushed out of the phone booth, ignoring Amy's worried, questioning voice as he let the handset drop, and raced across the forecourt of the gas station. He could hear Donahue's phone ringing now, a shrill, irritating tune. Donahue lifted the phone to his ear, thumb hovering over a button, about to press it to take the call...

The phone was sent spinning away as Jack slapped it from Donahue's hand. It clattered across the concrete, the battery breaking loose and skittering through the dirty, churned-up snow. Jack felt a sharp pain in his side as he stumbled to a stop against Donahue's car. He'd hit the protruding handle of the pump nozzle, which made a nasty cracking sound as it ground against the inside of the car's filler cap. More pain followed a moment later when Donahue, acting more out of surprise than anything, hit him in the chest with one elbow, knocking him to the ground.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" Donahue yelled down at him.

"I just saved your life!" Jack shot back, putting a hand on the side of the car to pull himself upright. "If you'd answered that phone, your car would have blown up, and you with it!"

Donahue stared at him in utter disbelief. "What?"

Jack pointed at the nozzle of the pump, which was now sticking out of the Merc's filler cap at an angle. A trickle of fuel ran down the car's flank. "I thought you were supposed to be smart!" he shouted. "Gas fumes are *explosive!*"

Donahue backed away from him, retrieving the pieces of his phone. "Maybe, but cellphones don't set 'em off!" he said, attempting to slot the battery back into place. "It's the same whiffle ball safety bullshit as laptops making planes crash. Now," he struggled for a moment with the battery before it finally locked into place with an audible click, "maybe you think you're genuinely helping me, or maybe you're just insane. I don't really give a shit. But if I ever see you again, I'm calling the police if I'm feeling generous—or my security guys if I'm not. In fact, fuck it, I'm gonna call my guys anyway. You got that? I've had death threats from the fuckin' *Mob*, I'm not scared of you! Now fuck off."

Jack looked at him, then slowly turned and walked away. He was sorely tempted to punch Donahue in the face, but restrained himself. As appealing as the idea was, it would only get him arrested, and he still had three more people to find and save.

Save.

He'd done it, hadn't he? In his mind's eye he could still see the darkened reflection blooming with orange light, Donahue's car consumed in fire. That hadn't happened. It might have been too late for Chelsea Cox, but at least he'd managed to stop Dawson Donahue from dying! With Amy safe as well, that was two out of three so far. Now he felt a lot more confident about making it five out of six.

He headed back to the phone booth. There was still time for Amy to take him to Katie Astin, the next person on death's list.

Dawson drummed his fingers against the Merc's steering wheel in frustration. His tennis game had been badly off, and he'd been beaten in straight sets by a man almost fifteen years his senior and at least five million less in net worth. Now that was embarrassing.

But not quite as embarrassing as the realisation that his encounter with the crazy guy, Curtis, genuinely had shaken him up. He didn't believe a word of what Curtis had been saying, or the bleatings of the safety nazis about the dangers of just about everything in the modern world, for that matter... but there was a nagging feeling of *what if?* at the back of his mind. Whether Dawson believed it or not, there was one thing that was for sure—*Curtis* believed it.

Was he in danger? Had he somehow been marked for death?

He shook his head. The idea was ridiculous.

And if he ever did see Curtis again, he was going to show him just who had *really* been marked for death. The bastard had scratched the Merc! Not only that, but he'd damaged the filler cap as well. The flap covering it wouldn't shut properly. If he got the chance, he'd make Curtis pay for it, one way or another.

He glanced at the dashboard clock. He was running a little late, but the traffic ahead of him, going over the Queensboro Bridge towards Queens, didn't seem too bad. Barring accidents, he should get home in plenty of time for the game.

"I don't want to say it, Jack, but..."

"Go ahead. You can say it."

"That was a complete waste of time."

Jack sighed and leaned back into the passenger seat of Amy's battered old Dodge Stratus. "You know, I think I'll have to agree with you there." The attempt to find Katie Astin had been a complete bust. Her television studio, the only address Amy had been willing to find for her, was a long way downtown and had taken them ages to reach through the Manhattan traffic. When they'd finally got there, they'd discovered, to Jack's dismay and Amy's annoyance, that Katie wasn't even there that day. Her next show was scheduled to be taped the following morning.

"Okay, so what now?" Amy asked, turning the car back uptown to head for her apartment.

"Now... I dunno." Jack stared at the darkened avenue ahead, the canyon of brick, concrete and glass stretching off into the distance. "Guess I'll have to try and find Katie and your chef woman tomorrow. And I still don't have a clue how we're going to find the rapper."

"Don't suppose you've remembered any of the lyrics from the song you heard?"

"Just words. Uzis and bitches and 'hos..."

"Oh my," Amy finished, grinning. Jack smiled back at her. "At least you saved Donahue, anyway. What kind of asshole uses a cellphone while he's filling his car anyway?"

"A rich asshole who thinks the rules don't apply to him, I'm guessing." Jack turned his head to look out of the side window, seeing his reflection in shop windows as they cruised past. The rippling image of the car rose and fell in brightness as they passed under streetlamps.

The sight made him remember something. Brighter and darker, brighter and...

The reflection of Donahue's car. It had been dark, as if it were night. But when he'd been at the gas station, it was still daylight...

"Oh my God," he mumbled, tensing in the seat.

Amy looked at him. "Jack...?" she asked, concerned.

"I didn't save Donahue," Jack said, as much to himself as to Amy. "It wasn't time for him to die, it was going to happen at night!" He leaned forward in his seat and stared up at the black sky overhead. The full moon was clear even through the glow of the city's lights, staring coldly down at him. "Amy, he's going to die now, now that it's night! Somehow, his car's going to blow up. We've got to get to his house and warn him!"

"Jack, we, ah, we talked about the whole 'turning up uninvited at the rich people's homes' thing already, remember?" Amy shifted in her seat, seeming very uncomfortable.

"If we don't, he's going to die!" Jack insisted. He looked pleadingly at Amy, who seemed torn. "All you have to do is find his address. You don't even have to come with me—you can sit in the car around the

corner if you like! I just have to get to his house before something bad happens!"

Conflicting emotions played across Amy's face, then she reached for her phone.

Dawson turned the corner, pushing the button on the dashboard remote for the garage door opener, and slowly rolled his Mercedes down the concrete slope into the basement garage. The garage was more than big enough for another car or two, but for now only the Merc lived there. Maybe he should get an SUV or something, just to fill up the space.

He stopped the car and got out, locking it with the remote after waiting for the garage door to close again. It might be technically inside his house now, but you could never be too secure. Walking to the stairs ahead of him, he paused to lift the lid on the big wheeled trash bin squatting against the back wall of the garage and toss in the empty Diet Coke can he'd drunk on the drive home. He winced at the smell that wafted out. It was still two days before he had to push the thing out onto the sidewalk for the scheduled garbage pickup, as well. Maybe he should get someone to swing by early.

Bounding up the stairs, he checked his watch. Still plenty of time before the game. He unlocked the door at the top and stepped into the kitchen. Last night's mostly empty Chinese food cartons gazed at him from the counter, a slightly stale smell of fried rice and vegetables tickling his nostrils, reminding him that he was getting through far too much takeout at the moment. Mom wouldn't approve. He grinned at the thought and brushed the cartons aside to make room for the twelve-inch deep pan pepperoni pizza he was about to order.

First things first, though. Coffee. He needed a quick hit of caffeine before the game. Normally he would have brewed up a pot of his favorite Colombian blend, but he wanted something fast, which meant the instant, cheap and nasty as it was. He filled the kettle and

put it on the hob, turning on the gas and pushing the igniter. Sharp electric cracks came from the ring, but no gas.

What was wrong with the thing? He could hear a faint hiss of gas, but not as loud as usual. Was the pipe blocked? He kept a finger on the igniter, leaning closer to the ring. Tiny flashes of lightning cracked between the electric contacts, but still no flames.

Annoyed, he banged a fist on the hob. Much to his surprise, it worked. Something rattled—he heard a faint echo through the pipes coming out of the basement—and the ring burst into life, blue flames jumping up just inches from his face. Dawson let out a hoot of shock and jumped back. That had never happened before.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, the weird guy's warning resurfaced, but he ignored it. Coffee, then pizza, then the game.

Beneath the hob, out of Dawson's sight, the gas pipe connecting the house's mains to the cooker shivered momentarily, as if the impact of his blow were still echoing through it. With a tiny cracking sound, a welded joint on the pipe split.

It was only a very small fracture, but it was just enough to let a gentle, almost inaudible hiss of gas escape into the kitchen.

In all the time he'd spent in New York, Jack had never been across the Queensboro Bridge, and if the traffic were always like this then that wasn't a bad thing. The tangled cross-hatch of iron girders above and around the car felt like a cage holding them in, trapping them.

"It's going to take forever at this rate," Amy complained, fumbling with a street atlas on her lap as they crawled along the bridge. "Even when we're off the bridge, we've still got a couple of miles to go."

"Maybe it'll ease up once we're across," Jack offered hopefully.

"I wouldn't put money on it." At least now they were past the halfway point, Roosevelt Island now behind them. "I just hope this guy's not doing anything dangerous."

Pizza. Imported beer. Cellphone switched off. A luxury reclining leather armchair. The game on the biggest plasma screen money could buy. What better way to spend a completely self-indulgent evening? Normally he would have added female company to the list, but, well, there *was* a game on.

The hell with it, thought Dawson, he was going to have a cigar as well.

Traffic on Queens Boulevard was better than on the bridge, but not by much.

"How much further?" Jack asked.

"About a mile."

Jack banged his hands against his legs in frustration, willing the cars ahead to clear.

Dawson carefully returned the box that held his illegal Cuban cigars, bought—perfectly legally over there!—on a trip to London, to its hiding place in a locked drawer, then neatly clipped off the end with his cigar cutter and looked for the lighter as he clenched the fat Romeo y Julieta between his teeth. He wasn't quite sure why he'd started smoking cigars in the first place, but it always seemed a lot more refined than puffing away on cigarettes. Besides, the way things were going in New York it was soon going to be impossible to smoke a cigarette in public, whereas there were a number of more upmarket places where cigars were not only welcomed, but actively encouraged. He'd already started to attend such places, as it never hurt to make influential contacts. But hell, he was still only twenty-six. There was still time for him to enjoy beer and pizza rather than brandy and lobster.

He found the lighter, lifted it to the tip of the cigar and put his thumb on the button...

After what had seemed like an eternity, they'd finally reached the turning. Amy was guiding the car through the streets of Forest Hills as Jack checked the street map for the exact address.

"Nice houses," Amy noted as they approached the last intersection. "Wonder how much they cost?"

"More than either of us'll earn in a lifetime," Jack said, now too keyed up as they approached Donahue's house even to get bitter about it. "Go left here, onto Prescott, then we want number 1329."

Dawson stopped, his thumb hovering just above the lighter's button, and sniffed. What was that?

Lowering the lighter, he took a couple of cautious steps across his sprawling lounge towards the kitchen door. There *was* a smell, faint but unpleasant all the same. He walked over to the door, sniffing again as he closed it, wrinkling his nose in distaste. Damn Chinese food. He should have taken the cartons down to the garage and put them in the trash. Now the smell of stale, greasy food had seeped into other rooms.

Well, he could do that later. But for now, the commercials were over and the game was back on.

"Here, here!" Jack unfastened his seatbelt and was out of the car almost before Amy had brought it to a full stop.

"Jack, wait—Jack!" She muttered a curse under her breath as Jack hared across the sidewalk and up the garden path of Donahue's large Deco-style house. Should she wait in the car for him, or...

To hell with it, she was already in too deep with the whole crazy situation just to sit things out. Besides, if Donahue really was in danger, it was her duty to help him out. Even if he *did* have more money than she would see in her entire lifetime.

"Oh, for..." Dawson looked round in irritation at the sound of the doorbell. He *knew* he should have Tivo'd the game so he could pause it! Watching an exciting game was almost a guarantee that somebody would come along and interrupt it.

Still trying to keep at least one eye and both ears on the game, he backed into the hall, glancing at the security monitor by the door. He'd had the cameras installed on the recommendation of the police when his negotiations with the unions had got a bit hairy and there had been the suggestion that somebody might pay him a visit at home to "persuade" him to back down. After he'd got his own company under control, there'd then been the minor matter of the underworld connections of some of his rivals when he'd undercut their bids for the city's contract...

The cameras had paid for themselves in terms of peace of mind, that was for sure.

Now, the one covering the front door was showing a man and a woman. Not a bad looking woman either, Dawson thought as he took a closer look at the person nearest the camera, if you liked Asian women. Which he did. He didn't recognize her, though, so he pushed the intercom button and demanded to know who they were. If they were Jehovah's Witnesses interrupting the game, he was going to tear them a new one.

"Mr Donahue?" said a man's voice that, even filtered through the intercom, sounded familiar. "It's Jack Curtis."

"What?" Dawson snapped, cutting in before the maniac could start on any more prophecies of doom. "How the hell did you find...? Whatever. Get off my property before I call the police! In fact, fuck it, I'm calling them anyway!"

"Mr Donahue? I *am* the police," the woman said.

Jack looked suspiciously at the monitor. "Let me see some ID." The woman held up what certainly looked like an authentic police badge to the camera. "Okay, now arrest this guy and get him the hell off my porch."

"Look, Mr Donahue," said the woman, "it's not that simple. What he's been saying might be right. Your life might really be in danger."

Dawson's heart fell. Great, now Curtis even had the *police* believing him.

"If we can just talk to you, just for a minute," the woman continued, "please? We just want to make sure that you're safe."

"Safe from *what* exactly?"

The woman looked at Curtis for a moment. Even with her face turned partly away from the camera, Dawson could tell from her expression that she wanted to know exactly the same thing.

"Please," said Curtis, "it's really important. Then we'll go, okay?"

Dawson made an exasperated noise, then said, "Okay," and moved to the door, first of all easing open the drawer in the small table next to it. There was a small .38 revolver in there, just in case, and he wanted to be able to get at it. He clicked open the multiple locks and stepped back towards the table as the door opened.

"Mr Donahue?" said the woman, entering first and extending a hand. "I'm Officer Tom, Amy Tom, 12th Precinct." Dawson shook her hand, deciding that yes, she was cute. He didn't move away from the table, though. And wasn't the 12th Precinct in Manhattan, not Queens? It definitely wasn't his local police station. "And I think you know Jack Curtis."

"We've met," Dawson said with a cold smile. "So, when are you going to pay up for damaging my Merc?"

Amy turned to Jack. "You damaged his car?"

"It was an accident!" said Jack, suddenly on the defensive. "And it was just a scratch..."

Amy shook her head. That complicated matters, if Donahue decided to make any kind of complaint. She wished now she hadn't told him which precinct she was from. Why not help him type out his complaint too? "Mr Donahue," she said, deciding that the best way to sort this out was to keep everything as businesslike as possible, "I know it sounds crazy, but there might be some truth to what Mr Curtis has been saying. We have reason to believe that you were a target for a killer..."

"The one who's dead, right?" Dawson asked sarcastically.

"Uh, yes, he was killed in a shootout two nights ago," Amy said. Donahue didn't need to know the details of exactly *who* shot him

right now, though. "But the first person on his list of targets died yesterday in unusual circumstances. We wanted to make sure that the other people we believe were on the list were aware of any... possible dangers."

"So, what, you think this dead guy had an accomplice?" asked Dawson, starting to become interested in spite of himself.

"It's, er... it's a possibility," Amy floundered. "But we just wanted to warn you to be careful, avoid any situation that might be dangerous. Watch out for accidents waiting to happen."

"Accidents?" said Dawson, back to dubious again.

Jack moved around Amy, encouraging Dawson to move one hand surreptitiously in the direction of the open drawer. "Chelsea Cox died in a million—no, a *billion*-to-one accident right in front of Am—Officer Tom here. We just want to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen to you."

"How *did* she die?"

Jack looked awkwardly at the floor. "She, uh, was impaled by a giant icicle."

"What?" Dawson spluttered, trying to suppress a laugh. "Seriously?" He raised his eyes to the ceiling, making a show of examining it. "Well, no ice up there, so I guess I'm safe. Anyway," he continued, looking back at his two visitors, "why're you both so worried about me?"

"For a start, it's my job," Amy said, starting to get frustrated with Donahue's attitude, "and for another..." She broke off, turning to look down the hall, her nostrils twitching. "Do you smell something?"

"I was, uh, just smoking a cigar." Dawson suddenly became acutely aware that his very illegal Cuban was still smouldering away in the ashtray on the arm of his Barcalounger. Great, now she had a reason to arrest him.

"No, not that." Amy moved towards a nearby open door, from which the sound of a football game was coming very loudly, and sniffed again. "I can smell gas."

"Gas?" Dawson asked, the thought of the cigar now looming larger in his mind for an entirely different reason.

"I can't smell anything," said Jack.

"I can." Amy stepped cautiously into the room, which she saw now was bigger than her whole apartment. "It's part of police training to find gas leaks, believe it or not. You," she said, pointing at Dawson, "very carefully, pick up that cigar and put it on the porch. Leave the door open. Where's your kitchen?"

Dawson pointed at the door as he gingerly took the ashtray. Shit, she was right—he *could* smell something as well as cigar smoke.

"Okay, both of you, wait by the front door." Amy took a couple of deep breaths and headed for the kitchen.

The stench of gas increased as she opened the door. She tried to listen for the sound of a leak, but the noise from the TV was overpowering. Instead, she hurriedly opened all the windows and went back to join Jack and Donahue. "There's definitely a leak. We need to call the gas company."

"Shouldn't we turn off the TV?" Jack asked.

"No, it might cause a spark. Anything that's on, leave it on, and don't switch any—" She turned to see Donahue holding a sleek cellphone, finger poised over the buttons. "No!" She slapped the phone out of his hand to the floor, the battery breaking loose on impact. "*What* did I just say?"

"Sorry!" Dawson gaped, so taken aback that he didn't even object to being told what to do by a stranger in his own home.

"Don't use *anything* electrical in the house until after the gas people turn up. I'm going to go back in and open as many windows as I can."

Dawson bent down to pick his phone up, trying to slot the battery back into the handset. This time, it refused to click back into place. "You broke my phone!"

"Use mine." Amy handed her own cellphone to him. "The number's already programmed in as 'emergency-gas'."

"That's very efficient," Jack commented.

"I like to be prepared. Do it *outside!* Jesus!" Dawson shamefacedly took his finger away from the phone's keypad and went onto the porch.

"You—this is *my* house!" he complained.

Amy jabbed a finger at him as she started back inside. "Don't think I don't know where that cigar came from," she warned, shutting him up.

Dawson watched her go, then turned to Jack as he started scrolling through the numbers in Amy's phone. "I think I'm in love," he muttered sarcastically. "So, what's the deal with you two, then? You her boyfriend, or something?"

"No," Jack said. "I only met her a couple of days ago." Something in Dawson's expression suggested that he was about to make an obnoxious comment about Amy. "I'm living at her apartment now, though."

Dawson settled for a look of confused jealousy, before getting through to the gas company and irritably explaining the situation.

Amy returned a few minutes later, by which time Dawson had finished his call and got an assurance that engineers were on their way. "Well?" he demanded.

"I opened as many windows as I could. It seems to be working. I don't think it's a very big leak."

"Right. Good." Dawson tapped one of his feet on the tiles of the porch for a moment, then fixed Amy with a look. "Well, seeing as it looks like I'm going to be spending the night in a hotel until the gas clears, any chance that I can go and get my car out of the garage, *officer*?"

"Go right ahead," Amy said. Dawson started to go back into the house. "Whoa, whoa, where're you going?"

"The garage entrance is in the kitchen," he told her impatiently.

Amy tried to remember the layout of the kitchen. Yes, there was another door in there, with a couple of locks on it. All the windows were open and the smell of gas had definitely become weaker, but there might still be the danger of a spark... "Did you lock the door when you came in?"

"No, it's just on the catch," Dawson assured her. "I don't need to use a key to open it, so there won't be any damn sparks." The cop's safety paranoia was starting to piss him off.

"Okay, okay," Amy reluctantly agreed. "But leave the door open."

Dawson nodded, then re-entered his house, picking up his car keys and putting on a pair of Nikes before going to the kitchen. There was still a faint hint of the rotten-egg odor of gas, but it was almost overpowered by the smell coming from the cartons on the counter. There was no risk now, he was sure. Although he did turn the catch to open the door leading down to the garage a lot more slowly and carefully than usual.

Outside, Jack rubbed his hands together, trying to keep them warm. "How long do you think the engineers'll be?"

"Depends," Amy said. "Usually if it's a leak they're pretty fast, especially if a cop's called them in."

"Or some rich asshole who makes a point of reminding them just how important he is."

"He did that, huh?" Amy asked, not surprised. "Hey, where's my phone?"

Jack glanced into the house. "He's still got it."

"Great. Whatever you do, don't let me forget to get it back off him when he brings his car out."

"No problem." Jack turned his attention to the exterior of the house, taking a couple of steps across the porch for a better look. A ramp headed off the main driveway, descending to a double-width garage door at basement level.

Something nagged at him, some piece of trivia from his childhood. "The garage is in the basement..." he said to himself.

"What?" Amy asked.

"The basement. Gas... Is gas heavier than air? Won't it sink downwards?"

Amy's eyes flicked wide open in horrified understanding. "Shit! If he starts the car..."

Just as he reached the base of the stairs, Dawson heard a thump behind him, and flinched. It wasn't a gas explosion, though, just the

kitchen door swinging shut. Damn. He'd forgotten about the counterweight that closed it automatically; he should have wedged it open with a chair or something.

Still, no harm done.

Amy rushed into the house, Jack right behind her. "Hey! *Hey!* Stop!"

The door to the garage had closed behind Dawson. He couldn't hear them.

"Shit!" Amy charged across the kitchen and fumbled with the locks on the door. Which one was the catch? She finally found it, ready to wrench it open until she realised she was about to grind metal against metal. In a room full of gas. Instead, she turned it, very carefully.

There was a faint smell of gas down in the garage too, Dawson noticed. But if anything it was even weaker than in the kitchen. Nothing to worry about.

Unseen by Dawson as he walked past the garbage can towards the sleek nose of the waiting Mercedes, the air seemed to shimmer and swirl, dust gently stirring and rising into the air, as though being wafted in his direction by an invisible fan...

Amy threw the door open and raced down the stairs two at a time. "Hey! Stop! *Stop!*"

Dawson had already raised his hand, thumb over the button on the head of his car key to deactivate the alarm and unlock the doors. Even as he heard Amy shouting behind him, and the sound of her and Jack clattering down the stairs, his thumb twitched.

Plip!

The Merc's headlights flashed. Motors whirled inside the doors, unlocking them. The alarm system disarmed itself.

Somewhere inside the complex wiring of the car, a tiny spark crackled between two terminals, impossibly overcoming all the precision-engineered safety features designed to prevent exactly that occurrence.

The spark touched the layer of gas that had lazily rolled down the stairs from the leaking pipe and pooled, undetected, on the floor of the garage.

The gas ignited.

Amy and Jack burst into the garage just in time to see a circle of blue flame leaping outwards from beneath the engine of the Mercedes. In a blink, the flames reached Dawson, spiraling up and around him, circling him like a fiery snake—

—and then faded, the thin gas already consumed before it could harm him.

Dawson let out a shriek of fear that quickly faded as he realized he was still alive, still unhurt. He'd felt the heat of the blue flame on his hands, his face... but now he was safe. "Jesus!"

Amy and Jack were frozen at the bottom of the stairs next to the trash can, almost afraid to move. "Are you okay?" Amy cautiously asked.

"Ha!" Dawson gasped in amazed relief, turning to face them. "I'm okay, I'm okay. Holy *shit*!" He clutched at his chest, hands trembling with the shock of the close call, and laughed. "I'm okay!"

The last dying flickers of the blue flame touched the line of gasoline that had leaked from the damaged filler cap.

Amy saw a brief flash of orange light shoot up the side of the Merc.

The broken cap had also allowed highly flammable petroleum vapor to build up behind the flap that covered it.

The vapor ignited.

The flap was blown open, letting oxygen feed the flames as they raced hungrily down the filler tube leading into the car's capacious

fuel tank.

The entire back end of the Mercedes exploded, the force of the blast directed almost directly backwards like a rocket as a welded seam in the fuel tank was ripped open. The car flew forward.

Dawson whirled round just in time to see his car leap at him like a pouncing lion, the explosion lifting it right off the ground as it shot across the garage and smashed into him at waist height, instantly snapping his ribs and spine with a horrible crack audible even over the thump of the explosion and mashing his vital organs into a gory pulp.

The flying, blazing Mercedes, Dawson folded over its hood and front bumper in a starburst of blood, slammed into the garbage can, flattening it against the wall of the garage less than a foot from Jack and Amy. They dived to the floor as a fountain of trash and gore and blazing fragments of metal carved through the air above them.

Silence.

Jack struggled upright, ears still ringing from the deafening bang of the explosion and the crunch of metal when the car hit the wall. Tiny crystals tinkled to the concrete floor as he moved, fragments of safety glass from the car's windows. He and Amy were covered in them, along with shreds of refuse from the flattened bin.

And spots of blood.

"Are you okay?" he asked Amy as she rolled over, dazedly brushing glass from her clothes.

"I think so. What happened to... Oh, God."

They both stood, staring at the remains of the car, flames still dancing inside it. The front end had been completely crushed, embedded almost a foot deep in the wall of the garage.

Along with the almost unrecognizable, twisted remains of the garbage can.

And Dawson Donahue.

SEVEN

It was another interrogation room, another police station, but Jack couldn't see any real differences between the one at the 12th Precinct and this one at Forest Hills.

Especially, he thought, since Pete Beriev was just as angry with him here as he had been the other night.

Beriev was technically outside his jurisdiction, being based in Manhattan, but despite being over the bridge Queens still fell under the watch of the NYPD. And as Jack was finding out, NYPD cops gave each other a lot of latitude—particularly when another NYPD cop was involved in an investigation. Beriev had come in part-way through Jack's interrogation, having apparently been watching Amy's questioning in another room, and done nothing but glower menacingly at him.

Two other detectives were handling the questioning. They weren't Morris and Cohen, but their attitudes were much the same; an outwardly relaxed, just-the-facts approach to questioning that concealed a steely determination to prize the answers out of him. The questions this time were different, though.

"So," said detective King, a thin-faced man with slicked-back hair who was sitting opposite Jack at the interrogation room's desk, "we know that you were at Donahue's company this afternoon. You say you were there to warn him that his life was in danger."

"That's right," Jack said.

"The company receptionist made a call to Donahue's security firm that said that you were stalking him, that you were *threatening* his life," chipped in King's partner, a slim, dark-haired woman called Combs who was sitting on the end of the desk. Under normal circumstances Jack would have found her attractive, but since he was stuck in a police precinct and she was by far the more aggressive of the two detectives, the circumstances were definitely not normal.

"That's not true," Jack protested wearily.

"We've got a transcript of the call right here," said Combs, waving a piece of paper at him.

"I don't care what it says there. She just made the call that Donahue told her to make."

"You've had an exciting couple of days, haven't you?" King observed, making a show of carefully laying out some pieces of fax paper on the desk in front of him. "Two nights ago, you shoot a man in order to save the life of a police officer. Officer Beriev's partner, in fact." He glanced at Beriev, who was lurking in a corner of the interrogation room, arms folded, glaring at Jack. "Then yesterday you try to save the life of a homeless man who wants to jump off a building. He still jumps, but by a million-to-one fluke he survives—and instead, a news reporter who spoke to you just a few minutes before dies instead. Then after *that*, we find your footprints in a warehouse at a wharf on the Hudson—the same warehouse that Officer Tom discovered was apparently where her attacker had been living. Funny thing, though, she never mentioned that you were there with her."

Jack said nothing, but felt considerably more worried than before, as much for Amy as himself. If she'd been caught lying during an investigation, her career could be over, and worse still she might even face charges. For what, he wasn't entirely sure, but he was certain they would be able to come up with something.

"And now today," King continued, "you worry Donahue's people enough for them to call the police, then later on show up at his house just before his car explodes and kills him. Three people dead in less than forty-eight hours, and you're there each time. Now, what are we supposed to think?"

"I shot that man in self-defense," Jack insisted. "And Officer Tom backed me up on it. Chelsea Cox died because she was hit by falling ice. I mean, what—you think I somehow persuaded her to stand in the exact spot where I'd deliberately bust a pipe to make icicles, then threw my friend off a roof so he'd hit a phone line and make the ice fall?"

"Y'know, when he puts it like that, the man has a point," Combs said to King, before returning her attention to Jack. "The thing is, though, when somebody like Dawson Donahue dies, in very suspicious circumstances, I might add, it tends to become a very high

priority case, what with his connections to City Hall and all. So the forensics work gets put at the top of the list. Now, you say that you and Officer Tom entered the garage just before the car exploded?"

"Yes," Jack said, deciding to keep his answers as short as possible. Combs had a look in her brown eyes that suggested she was about to drop a bombshell, and he had no idea what it could be.

"So you were nowhere near the car? You couldn't have touched it or interfered with it in any way?"

"No."

Combs hopped off the table and slowly walked around it to stand behind her partner's shoulder. "And you didn't touch it afterwards, say, to see if Donahue was still alive?"

"No, it was still on fire. And Donahue... He was dead."

"Did you or Officer Tom try to check him for signs of life?"

"There wasn't much point," Jack said uneasily. "He was kind of splattered all over the wall."

"So you didn't touch the car."

"No."

"Interesting," Combs said, a hint of I've-got-you-now enthusiasm in her voice. "Because we found your fingerprints on the car. Right by the filler cap. Which is where you, Officer Tom *and* forensics all say the explosion started. Maybe you'd like to tell me how they got there if you never touched the car?"

Shit. Jack had completely forgotten about his encounter with Donahue at the gas station, but now he could see how it could turn into the noose that hanged him. "That was earlier on," he began, trying to remember exactly what happened. "It was right after Donahue left his office. He was filling up his car at the gas station across the street, and he was using his cellphone. I thought his car was going to blow up."

"Very civic-minded of you." The sarcasm came from Combs, not Beriev; the burly cop had seemingly decided to keep his mouth shut now that he wasn't on his home turf.

"So what exactly happened?" King asked.

"Um... I was on the phone to Amy, Officer Tom—"

"Cellphone?"

"No, a payphone by the gas station."

"What were you calling her about?" Combs demanded.

"I was asking if she could come pick me up."

"So you've got her acting as your personal taxi service now?" said Beriev. It was the first time he'd spoken directly to Jack since entering the room, and he almost spat the words between his teeth in seething anger. Combs gave him a look of warning before turning back to Jack.

"Then what?" she asked.

"Then, I saw him take out his cellphone to answer a call, right while he was standing there with the filler cap open, pumping gas. So I ran out of the phone booth to stop him."

"Stop him how?" said King.

"I, er... knocked the phone out of his hand," Jack admitted. "So he hit me, knocked me down." His brow creased as he remembered the scene. "That must have been when I touched the car, I fell against it..." The horrible thought occurred to him that he might actually have been responsible for damaging the filler cap in the first place—that he had somehow unwittingly been a part of the chain of events that led to Donahue's death.

"And you didn't tamper with the filler cap in any way?"

"No, of course not! I was trying to save him, not kill him!" said Jack. The detectives shared a look, then glanced up as someone knocked on the door. Another detective, a man whom Jack had briefly seen earlier with Amy when they'd been brought to the police station, leaned into the room and gestured for Combs and King to join him outside. They left the room, leaving Jack alone with Beriev.

"Three people dead, Curtis," said Beriev, stepping forward the instant the door closed. "And you've somehow dragged Amy into the middle of it all."

"I haven't dragged *anyone*," Jack told him. "She wanted to help me."

"You have any idea what you've got her into, Curtis?" Beriev snarled, standing at the table and leaning against it, lowering his face towards Jack's. "They're questioning her next door. *Questioning* her! They want to know what the hell she was doing turning up at Dawson

Donahue's house right at the moment he died! They think you're responsible, somehow. And because she was with you, that means they think she's an accessory!"

"I didn't kill him!" Jack insisted.

Beriev narrowed his eyes. "You think a shave and a clean shirt changes anything?" he said. "You're still a bum! I don't know what you've said, what you've done to get her to risk throwing away her entire career, but I am not going to let that fucking happen. Do you hear me? If you cause her any kind of harm whatsoever—"

"You're gonna do what?" Jack snapped. He'd finally had enough of Beriev's threats. "You're gonna shoot me? Is that it?"

Face twitching with anger, Beriev jabbed a fat finger at Jack's face. "I'm warning you, Curtis. You stay the fuck away from her."

Jack was about to reply when the door opened again, Combs and King re-entering the interrogation room. Beriev hastily stepped back from the desk. The detectives didn't return to their positions, instead waiting just inside the door. Jack looked round at them.

Combs spoke first. "Looks like you're free to go. For now."

Beriev exploded. "*What?*"

"Donahue made a call to the gas company to say there was a gas leak at his house, from Tom's own cellphone, about five minutes before the time of death. The call was recorded, and it's been checked out. It was his voice. He didn't sound afraid for his life, or even concerned—more pissed off, really."

"So what?" demanded Beriev. "Doesn't mean Curtis here didn't kill him!"

"The gas company engineers checked out the house after Donahue died," Combs continued, annoyed at being interrupted. "They found a small leak in a pipe in the kitchen. So that checks out. And from the volume of gas that escaped, and the rate it was leaking, there's no way Mr Curtis would have had time to have caused it somehow."

"How do you know?" Beriev asked.

"We checked the traffic cameras on the Queensboro Bridge and Queens Boulevard. They saw Officer Tom's car, with two people inside, *after* the time the leak must have started," explained King.

"You don't know the other person was Curtis!" said Beriev.

Combs raised an eyebrow. "So... you're accusing your own partner of lying?"

Beriev's face fell as he realized what he'd just said. "No! No, hell no! I didn't mean..."

"I thought you didn't," Combs said, a tiny smile creasing one corner of her mouth. "As far as preliminary forensics goes, there's no evidence of any kind of explosive device, no sign that the car was deliberately sabotaged, no evidence that the leaking pipe was tampered with in any way. There's nothing to contradict Mr Curtis's statement—or Officer Tom's either. That doesn't mean something else might not turn up, but for now..."

"So, I can go?" Jack asked cautiously.

"I think I already told you that," Combs told him in a somewhat snippy tone. Jack stood up. "But we might have more questions for you later," she added just as Jack passed her. "And for Officer Tom."

Beriev looked pained and launched into an angry objection, but Jack had already left the interrogation room and closed the door behind him. Looking around, he saw Amy sitting on a bench further up the corridor. She stood up as he walked over. "How did it go?" he asked.

Amy made a sour face. "I think I'm going to have to answer some really, *really* tough questions when I get back to work," she said. "The whole business about how I found the warehouse came up again, and I don't think they believed what I told them. Plus, they know that you were there as well. They matched your footprints to the ones in the alley where you saved me. Oh boy. This is going to be fun."

"What about tonight? About Donahue?"

"I told them exactly what I saw happen," Amy said. "He used the remote for his car, it lit the gas in the garage, which lit a fuel leak and blew the car up. I just didn't mention anything about visions or premonitions of explosions. But," she continued, looking unhappy, "I'm probably going to have to at some point. They already wanted to know how I found out Donahue's home address, which technically is a breach of department rules in itself."

"I'm sorry," Jack said, meaning it. "For dragging you into all of this, I mean."

"You didn't drag me into anything, Jack," she assured him. "I did this all of my own accord."

"Funny," Jack said, "that's exactly what I told Beriev in there."

"Pete's still in there?" Amy looked in the direction of the interrogation room. "What's he doing?"

"Complaining about me, I guess. Although," he said as he saw the door open, "maybe you can ask him yourself." Beriev emerged from the room, face beet-red with rage. He spotted Jack standing with Amy and stormed over to them.

"Pete," Amy began, trying to calm him down, but Beriev had already started talking.

"Amy, what the hell are you doing with this guy?" he said, moving between Amy and Jack. "Don't you know how much trouble he's gonna get you into?"

"Pete, listen—"

"No, you listen! They just told me that the department's going to have to keep investigating all this, that Internal Affairs might even get involved! Is that what you want? This guy's going to kill your career and maybe even get you charged with something if you stick with him any longer!"

"Jesus, Pete!" Amy finally shouted, startling him into silence. "Listen to me! Jack's not forcing me to do anything, he hasn't hypnotized me or drugged me or coerced me into helping him, okay? I'm doing this because I'm trying to save lives!"

"Whose lives?" Beriev asked, instantly suspicious. "And why are they in danger?"

"I... I can't tell you that," Amy said reluctantly. "You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"But you believe *him*?" Beriev gave Jack a nasty look over his shoulder. "You won't tell me what's going on, but you let this guy walk into your life out of nowhere and take over? How does *he* know who's going to die?"

"I can't tell you that either. But what he's said—what I've *seen*—means I believe him."

Beriev let out a noise of frustration, stepping back and clenching his fists. "Why the hell can't you tell me, Amy? Talk to me! You know that I've always looked out for you, that we've never had any secrets from each other. What's changed now? What's so God-damn special about this guy Curtis? What does he know that you won't tell me?"

Amy clenched her jaw, torn between loyalty to her partner and mentor and the understanding that she could cause a great deal of damage to her career. "Pete," she finally said, "this is off the record, okay? You have to promise me that."

Beriev seemed equally torn, before reluctantly nodding. "Okay, Amy. Off the record. What's going on?"

"The thing is," said Amy, dropping her voice almost to a whisper, "is that Jack had a... He had a vision."

"He *what*?"

"He had a *vision*," Amy repeated, "a premonition. Now I don't know how it happened or what the hell it means, but all I do know is that if he hadn't had it, I'd be *dead* now. That guy in the alley would have killed me. And he saw Chelsea Cox and Donahue dying too. He was trying to save them."

Beriev stared at her for a long moment, chewing at the bottom of his moustache. "Jesus, Amy!" he finally exclaimed. "Have you heard yourself? This isn't you! You must've... That bang on the head must have fucked you up somehow, because you are *not* thinking straight!"

"I'm thinking just fine, Pete," Amy said, her own anger starting to rise at being patronized.

"Then why can't you see what's happening?" said Beriev, almost pleading. "You're going to wreck your life if you carry on like this, if you keep listening to Curtis and letting him pull you into whatever the fuck it is he's doing! Premonitions? My ass! Look, please, just come with me. I'll take you home, you can just rest, recover from everything that's been going on—"

"Pete!" Amy cut in. "*Listen!* I'm absolutely fine, I know what I'm doing... and I don't need you to protect me! Okay? You got that, am I clear? Jack, let's go," she said, pulling on her coat and turning her back on Beriev. Jack stepped warily around the cop, pulling on his own coat.

Beriev stood frozen for a moment, then rushed forward to block Amy's path. "Get out of my way, Pete," she told him in a low voice.

"Amy..."

She looked up into his face, eyes full of controlled fury. "Out. Of. My. Way."

Beriev took the hint, and stepped aside to let Amy past. He glared hatefully at Jack as he followed her.

They left the precinct and headed into the cold night towards Amy's car. "So," Jack said, hoping he'd given Amy enough time to calm down a little, "what are you going to tell them? Internal Affairs, I mean?"

"Have to tell them the truth, I guess. Just hope they believe me." They reached the car. "We'll just have to find the other people and warn them before they... before they end up like Donahue."

"Look, Amy," Jack said as he got into the car, "I... I don't want to be the one who loses you your job, or anything like that. If you want to try to fix things up, get out of this whole thing, I totally understand."

"It's a bit late for that now, isn't it?" Amy said, with a distinct edge to her voice. She started the car and pulled away from the curb, making a U-turn to head back to Manhattan. Her voice softened. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay," Jack assured her. "I probably deserved it, I've kind of disrupted your life..."

"Jack," Amy reminded him, "you *saved* my life. The least I can do is help you. Especially if it means saving other people's lives as well." She smiled at him.

"Thanks," said Jack, returning the gesture. His stomach chose that moment to make a loud gurgling sound. "Oh. Heh. Excuse me."

"I know how you feel," Amy said. "What say we go find something to eat?"

One thing about Manhattan is that no matter how late at night it may be, there's always somewhere open where a person can buy a

meal. As long as they're prepared to risk a bit of culinary adventure, that is.

"Can't say I've ever had... what kind of place is this again?" Jack asked, poking at his plate. It was rice with some kind of fish, with quite a strong spicy aftertaste. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was very different from what he'd become used to over the past couple of years.

"Surinaman," Amy said between mouthfuls.

"Where?"

"South America. Next to Guyana, above Brazil. Geography was one of my straight-A subjects."

"Huh." Jack took another taste. "Didn't know they grew rice in South America."

"Well, now you do. You not too experimental with food, then?"

"I haven't really had much of a choice in what I get to eat recently," said Jack.

Amy paused mid-chew, looking sheepish. "Oops. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Besides, I used to live in Jersey, not Manhattan. It's a bit less... cosmopolitan across the river."

They ate in silence for a couple of minutes, the only other people in the little restaurant being a bored-looking waiter and the cook. Jack got the distinct feeling that Amy wanted to ask him something, but was now too embarrassed. Eventually, curiosity overcame awkwardness.

"What did you do?" she finally asked. "Before, I mean."

"Before...?"

"Before you, uh... became homeless. You lived in Jersey, you said you used to be married..."

"Oh." Jack didn't really want to answer, but felt he somehow owed Amy a reply, if only for the fact that she was buying him dinner. "Well, I... I used to be a bus driver, actually."

"Yeah? What, in Jersey?"

"No, over here. We just lived in Jersey 'cause it was a bit cheaper. Used to drive airport shuttles mostly, but I did some longer hauls upstate as well..." His voice tailed off as the thought of driving upstate brought back an unwanted memory.

"So what happened?" Amy asked. She didn't want to press too hard, as she could tell Jack was suddenly uncomfortable talking about it, but damn it, now she was curious. She wanted to find out how the man who'd saved her life had gone from having a wife and a job to living on the streets of New York.

Jack was silent for a few moments, staring at his food. "I was in an accident," he said at last, not raising his eyes from his plate. "When I was driving upstate, a few years back. I, uh... I killed someone."

"Oh, God," said Amy. "Jack, I'm sorry."

"It was in Mount Abraham," Jack continued, voice flat. "The bus company had put these new rules into place about meeting timetables, about how the drivers would have penalties if they ran late too often... and you know what it's like getting out of the city sometimes, so all the drivers had to speed once they got on the open road if they wanted to have any chance of meeting their timetable.

"So this day, I was trying to make up for lost time after I set off from the bus station at Mount Abraham, 'cause I was maybe half an hour behind schedule. I was on the outskirts of town heading for the Parkway, the roads were clear, the lights were green, so I decided to make up for lost time. And..." He paused, then looked up at Amy sadly. "And a girl stepped off the sidewalk right in front of me." The memory returned, the blur at the edge of his vision jumping into perfect clarity for the brief instant before blood splashed across the windscreen of the bus. A young woman... dead in the gutter, her mangled body dragged over a hundred yards up the road before he'd been able to bring the bus to a screeching, skidding stop. "You remember when we were at the morgue, we were talking about Mount Abraham, and Flight 180?"

"Yeah?"

"She was one of the survivors. Sound familiar?" Jack asked rhetorically. "Somebody cheats death, then dies in a terrible *accident* not long after?"

Amy stared at him, open-mouthed. "Jesus. What happened to you, though? Afterwards?"

"Me?" Jack let out a humorless laugh. "Well, after the police did their investigation into the death, they worked out that I was

exceeding the speed limit when I hit her. Which automatically meant I was arrested on a charge of vehicular homicide. It took all our savings for me to make bail, I got sacked because the bus company didn't want to deal with the negative publicity or have me blowing the whistle that they were forcing their drivers to break the law if they wanted to get their full pay, I started drinking kind of heavily because of all this, and at the trial they decided that even though there was no way I could have avoided hitting her, since I was speeding I should still be punished. So I got three months. And when I came out..." He laughed again, a single, grim snort. "I guess Jennifer didn't want to be married to an ex-con."

"Shit," Amy said quietly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay," Jack said, shrugging to show an acceptance that he didn't fully feel. "Anyway, after I got out, I tried to get a job, but, well... Didn't really have much of a chance of getting another driving job after that. So I moved into New York to try to find work, any kind of work. And didn't really have much luck there either. Eventually I started to run out of money—drinking so much didn't really help out there—so had to keep moving to crappier and crappier apartments, then crappier and crappier rooms... and at some point I didn't have enough money left for the worst room in the city. So," he concluded, softly clapping his hands together, "that's pretty much my life story. The last two years or so, I've been on the streets. On the plus side," he added with forced cheer, "I don't have a drinking problem any more. I can't afford it."

Amy looked at him with sympathy. "Jesus, Jack. And your ex-wife, she wasn't willing to help you out at all?"

"No. I thought about it, but... I didn't ask her to."

Amy raised an eyebrow, mild irritation atop the sympathy. "You know, Jack, pride's one thing, but you *can* ask people for help sometimes, or even just take it when it's offered, without having to feel guilty about it."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked, stung.

"Come on, every time I offer you money or buy anything for you," she indicated the meal with the flick of one finger, "you look like someone just slapped you in the face."

Jack was about to deny it, to come up with some retort, when he realized that she was actually right. Pride *had* stopped him from calling Jennifer, to ask for help.

"I *want* to help you," Amy continued. "I want to help *people*, in general. It's one of the reasons I became a cop in the first place. And I know you want to help people, otherwise you wouldn't be going through all of this. You want to find the people on that sick bastard's list and keep them alive."

"Haven't had much luck so far," Jack said glumly, looking back down at his food.

"There's still four more people," Amy reminded him. "And we know who two of them are, so we can find them tomorrow."

"We?"

Amy gave him a sardonic smile. "If my career's going to go down the crapper, I at least want to do something worthwhile with it beforehand. So yes, I'm going to *help* you, and you're going to accept my help and not feel guilty about it. Okay?"

Jack looked at her for a moment, then broke into a genuine smile. "Okay."

Amy smiled back. "Cool. Now eat your dinner."

They continued the meal, exchanging trivia on each other's backgrounds. Jack was slightly surprised to learn that Amy was the older sister to no fewer than six brothers, her mother having died when Amy was fourteen. "Probably another reason why I became a cop," she joked. "I kind of had to take on the role of my mother, and help keep the family running. If I can keep six boys in line, then the rest of New York should be easy."

"Would you have become a cop anyway, though?" asked Jack.

"I dunno, actually. I always wanted to be a sculptor when I was a kid. And I still do it, you probably saw all my stuff at the apartment, but it's just a hobby now. Maybe if my mom hadn't died, I might've put more time into it and got somewhere professionally with it." She shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Weird how one single event can affect the course of your entire life, isn't it?" said Jack. He lifted the last piece of fish to his mouth.

Wait a minute.

Jack straightened in his seat, suddenly deep in thought. Amy noticed his change of expression and looked at him curiously. "What?"

"I just thought of something," he said, still trying to link together all the lines of thought churning in his mind. "If that girl *had* died on Flight 180, then she wouldn't have stepped out in front of my bus in Mount Abraham. I wouldn't have lost my job and gone to jail, Jennifer wouldn't have thrown me out, I wouldn't have moved to New York to look for work..." He looked at Amy, his eyes widening as he came to the conclusion of the chain of events. "And I wouldn't have been in the alley to save you from that psycho."

Amy stared at him, trying to take in what she'd just heard. "Normally, I'd say that was just a coincidence, but..."

"But," Jack finished for her, "you're starting to think that there *are* no coincidences, right? Just like me. What if all this is linked somehow? You remember what that mortician, Bill, said about death having a plan? What if the people who survived Flight 180 somehow started a... a chain reaction that affected that plan?"

A cold sensation crawled unpleasantly through Amy's body. "So, what... You're saying that I was *meant* to die in the alley?"

"Think about it," said Jack, forcing himself to work out the horrific possibilities. "If she'd stayed on that plane, that guy would have killed you, and probably everybody else on his list as well. But she didn't. And because of that, I was here to help you."

"Bill said something else about death having a plan," Amy murmured, the cold sensation not going away. "He said it got very pissed off if anyone interfered with it."

"But I just remembered something about the survivors," said Jack. Despite the late hour and the tiring day, his mind was now going into overdrive. "They got off the plane in the first place because one of them had a *premonition*. A *vision*! Just like the one I had. They saw the plan, and were able to change it!"

"Jack," said Amy, voice subdued. "I just remembered something about Flight 180 too. All the survivors died. *All* of them. There was a whole conspiracy theory thing going on in the papers afterwards. And Chelsea and Donahue are already dead. What if the same thing

happens to everyone our guy would have killed as well? What if death finds another way to kill them?" The hint of fear on her face meant she had no need to say out loud that she included herself in the group.

"But," Jack said, gesticulating, "I wasn't one of the people on the guy's list! I was never meant to be a part of all this, but somehow, because of Flight 180, I am. Maybe that means I can still help save the others!"

Amy was unconvinced, but... Jack's theory was vastly preferable to the alternative. "You really think so?"

"I have to," Jack insisted. "Look, I... I killed one of the Flight 180 survivors. Maybe this is my way of atoning for that, somehow, by saving other lives."

"Maybe," said Amy. "I hope so." She checked her watch. "Jeez, it's after midnight. We'd better get moving, I get the feeling these people want to close up and go home." She looked over at the waiter and cook, who were leaning against the kitchen doorway, watching them sidelong, and waved at them. The waiter hurried over, the bill already in his hand. He seemed unsure who to present it to; Amy gave Jack a meaningful look as she accepted the bill.

"I'm not saying anything," he said, holding up his hands.

"Glad to hear it." Amy dug out money for the meal and a generous tip, which seemed to lighten the mood of the waiter. "Shall we go?"

Back at Amy's apartment, Jack put the blankets on the couch while Amy was in the bathroom. He took a closer look at some of Amy's other wire sculptures as he waited for her to emerge. He was the first to admit that he was no expert, but what she'd done looked perfectly good to him, now that he was able to figure out what they represented. Birds and animals, mostly. A cat, a toucan, an eagle with its wings outstretched.

Could she have been good enough to become a professional sculptor if she hadn't had to accept a place of authority in her family?

Jack had no idea, but it was certainly an interesting "what if?" thought.

Another, similar thought was never far from the forefront of his mind. What if he *were* here for a reason? *Could* he save the killer's intended victims? So far, he'd only saved one out of three, not a favorable number. But now that he knew what he was up against, now that he knew the signs...

Amy emerged from the bathroom, holding something in one hand. "Here," she said. "I got this for you."

Jack looked at what she was holding. "A toothbrush?"

"I thought you might need it. And no, it's not a comment on your breath or anything," she quickly added. "I just can't imagine what it must be like not being able to clean your teeth."

Jack took the toothbrush and grinned. "Meh, it's kind of like being French, I guess." Amy giggled. "Thanks."

"No problem." She turned to leave, then stopped at her bedroom door, looking back at him. "Jack, everything you told me tonight, about your life..."

"Yes?"

Amy paused for a moment before answering. "I really appreciate that you were able to be so honest with me. It must have been hard. All of it."

"It was," said Jack. "But, it's, er..." He glanced around the apartment, then back at her. "It's been a little easier the last couple of days, despite everything. Thank you."

Amy smiled, charmed. "My pleasure. See you in the morning, Jack."

"Goodnight." He stood for a moment, staring at the door as it closed behind her, then held up the toothbrush. Some things *had* been easier.

He didn't want to think about what would happen when, one way or another, they became harder again. Instead, he went into the bathroom, ready to make himself feel completely clean for the first time in two years.

EIGHT

Hanging around on a freezing cold street was nothing new to Jack, but after the last couple of days, where he'd actually had a roof over his head, proper meals and the chance to get properly cleaned up, it felt very much like going two steps back.

He hadn't had much time to worry about what would happen to him once this whole thing was actually over—even during the time he'd spent sitting waiting in the reception area at Donahue's company, he'd been more concerned about wondering how he was going to convince a bunch of wealthy celebrities that their lives were in danger—but now, an icy wind trying to cut through the warmth of his new clothes, the depressing possibility that he was going to have to return to life on the streets was sinking in.

Amy wasn't going to let him sleep on her couch forever, that was for sure.

He stamped his feet into the snow covering the sidewalk, partly to try to keep the blood flowing and partly to shake off the gloom that had come over him, as he looked up and down the street, wondering when Katie Astin was going to show up.

Jack wasn't the only person waiting for her. The bland downtown steel-and-glass office tower that was home to Katie's television studio also housed plenty of other businesses, but he doubted that the little crowd of people hanging around outside were awaiting the arrival of any of the lawyers or accountants or dentists who shared the building.

Nothing better to do for the moment, he took a look at the other people who were braving the cold to meet Katie. They were mostly women, which surprised him slightly; he would have expected somebody with Katie's looks and background to have attracted more men—though the handful of mostly middle-aged men present did have a slightly seedy, sweaty look to them, suggesting their reasons for turning up weren't entirely driven by an urge to share in the love of the Lord. There was a clear age divide amongst the women, the older ones big-haired, makeup-caked suburbanites, the kind of

women he'd expect to find organizing church bake sales or attending PTA meetings. The younger women—girls, more accurately—looked more like they were waiting to scream at Britney Spears or some other pop star than an actress-turned-televangelist. The fact that each girl was accompanied by a big-haired suburbanite suggested they'd got full parental permission to skip school for this event.

Katie Astin seemed an unlikely kind of televangelist. The ones he'd seen on TV, in the days when he'd *had* a TV, had always struck him as the most ridiculous, showboating extreme of the clergy, orange-tanned buffoons bellowing about hellfire and damnation as they demanded money to build their fancy churches. He had a hard time picturing the perky blonde with dating difficulties he remembered from her sitcom days as a Bible-thumping preacher. On the other hand, she *had* been an actress; maybe this was just another kind of role.

The psycho had obviously found her particular interpretation offensive enough to want to kill her for it. And her slogan was '*Feel the love*', after all—another sense for his collection. Severed, bloody hands on the circular table in the warehouse; the image flashed unbidden through his mind.

All the signs suggested that Katie would have been the third intended victim of the killer. With Chelsea and Donahue already dead, that meant she was next. And it was up to Jack to convince her that while the killer might be dead, the threat to her life was anything but.

The smell of hot dogs wafted through the cold air. Normally, the scent would have made him feel desperately hungry, but today, after a decent breakfast, the only feeling it gave him was a purely greedy desire for the traditional New York mix of ketchup, mustard and onions on junk food. He resisted the temptation. A few of the waiting people couldn't, however, drawn almost magnetically to the gleaming steel cart. The elderly man wheeling it along the sidewalk clearly knew the best times and places to find potential customers.

He was just wondering if Amy was having any better luck finding Dominique Swann when the mood of the waiting crowd changed. "Here she comes!" somebody squealed. People surged towards the

curb, looking excitedly up the street. Jack followed their gaze to see a black Cadillac stretch limo approaching.

The limo pulled out outside the building, the waiting people immediately shuffling and skipping excitedly to position themselves right by its rear door. The uniformed driver hurried around the car, politely but firmly asking the crowd to step back so that he could open the door. Jack took up position at the edge of the little crowd, standing close to the building entrance so that he'd be near Katie as she went inside.

The driver swung the door open, and the waiting people's mood instantly changed from expectant excitement to out-and-out delight. Being considerably taller than anyone else in the crowd, Jack was able to get a clear look at Katie Astin as she stepped onto the street.

The picture he'd seen on the billboard hadn't done her justice. Katie Astin had entered adulthood very successfully, Jack had to admit. No longer bottle blonde, her hair had reverted to a natural reddish-brown, and her face had lost most of its teenage roundness to take on a more sculpted shape. She smiled at the crowd as she got out of the limo, a long dark overcoat flowing around her almost like a cape as she stood. No orange tan here, and no garish polyester televangelist clothing either. She was smartly turned out in a close-fitting blue dress and heels.

"Hey, hi, how are you all today?" she asked, seeming genuinely pleased, though not surprised, to see the people waiting for her. Jack was mildly surprised that the neutral, Middle American voice he vaguely remembered from TV was actually unreal, the product of acting and elocution lessons; the flat Brooklynite vowels creeping back into her words were unmistakable. Discovering that she was a local girl rather than some Bible Belt huckster for some reason helped Jack warm up to her.

Some of the waiting crowd seemed to be regulars, as Katie was greeting people by name, in no hurry to get inside despite the cold. She asked about one woman's family and listened attentively to her answer before moving on to the awed young girl next to her. She certainly knew how to work a crowd, though the way she was going, it looked as though she was going to talk to everybody personally

before she actually reached Jack. She even called over to the hot dog vendor by name, getting a cheery wave back.

It took almost five minutes before Katie finished, asking about the health of a relative here, making assurances that keeping the faith would help things turn out better there. Finally, having worked her way slowly across the sidewalk to the glass doors of the building, she ran out of adoring fans to chat to. Turning to address them, she said, "Wow, I'm really touched by your devotion—especially in coming out to see me on such a cold day!" The crowd laughed. "But remember," Katie went on, more seriously, "it's not me who deserves your devotion, but the people I work for—the Lord God, and his son Jesus Christ." A few responses of "amen" came from the crowd. "Follow their teachings, follow their word, offer help to the people around you who need it, and you will receive your reward, in this life or the next." Her voice rose to a grandstanding chant as she held up her hands. "See the light!"

"And feel the love!" the people chorused, as if responding to a catchphrase. Which they probably were, Jack thought. He remembered that the words had been on Katie's poster.

Katie finally headed for the doors. Jack, who had by this time moved back from the edge of the crowd to lean against the wall, stepped forward to intercept her. Her driver, until now hanging back inconspicuously, suddenly materialized at her side, regarding him suspiciously. Close up, the driver seemed almost as wide as he was tall. "Hi. Ms Astin?"

"Call me Katie," she said, quickly looking Jack up and down and extending a hand. "What can I do for you...?"

"Uh, Jack." He took Katie's hand, getting a firm but fast shake in response. "Listen, I need to talk to you. It's very important."

"I'm really sorry, Jack," she said, sounding sincere, "but I've got to go and record my show now." said Katie. "You're welcome to come in and watch the show, though."

"No, this is really important," Jack insisted. "Your life's in danger."

The sudden silence made Jack slowly glance around at Katie's fans. Even though he'd tried to keep his voice low and calm to avoid sounding like some kind of raving maniac, apparently every single

one of them had heard him, and they were now staring at him with expressions that suggested they'd just seen him handing their idol a fresh turd. By the time he looked back at Katie, he couldn't help but notice that her driver had now interposed himself between them.

"Not from me!" he hurriedly qualified. This wasn't going to go any better than when he'd tried to warn Donahue, he could already tell.

"Whaddya mean her life's in danger?" shrilled one of the big-haired women, her oversized earrings shaking. Some of her companions started asking similar questions, closing in around Jack.

Jack ignored them, turning his attention back to Katie. "Look," he said, "this is kind of hard to explain, but believe me, *I'm* not the danger. If I can just have five minutes, you can have your bodyguard here with you if you like..."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Katie said, clearly uncomfortable, "but I really do have to get going, and if you think my life is in danger, you should tell the police. If there's any problem, they can handle it, okay?"

"They wouldn't believe me if I did," Jack sighed, realizing this was going nowhere.

"People believe a lot of things, Jack," said Katie, managing to sound both sympathetic and slightly patronizing at the same time, "but there's only one belief that really matters, and that's belief in the will of the Lord."

"That's what this might *be*!" Jack complained, but Katie ignored him.

"Believe in that, and you'll find what you need to help you through this time in your life. Now, I've got to go. I'm sorry I couldn't help you." She stepped away, looking back over one shoulder and raising a hand to the crowd. "See the light!"

"And feel the love!" they called back. The driver stood at the door, blocking Jack's path and glowering sternly at him until he stepped back. Once he was sure Katie had disappeared into one of the elevators, the driver finally returned to the limo and drove off, leaving Jack alone under the hostile stares of the crowd.

He put up his hands. "Uh, feel the love?" he offered with a weak smile.

Amy's search for Dominique Swann had led her to a large chain bookstore on Fifth Avenue where, after numerous phone calls and further worries about what she was doing to her career by using her police ID to get information out of an uncooperative personal assistant, she'd discovered the celebrity chef was doing a book signing.

After what she'd seen happen to both Chelsea and Donahue, she was already casting paranoid glances around for possible dangers even as she walked into the store. The place being modern and large meant there were no tightly-packed rows of rickety bookshelves that might somehow come crashing down upon an unsuspecting victim like giant dominoes, but she still found herself leaning cautiously against one of the larger wooden units to see how firmly it was fixed to the floor. It was rock solid. Now feeling a little foolish, Amy started to hunt for Dominique.

It didn't take long to find out where she was going to be; rack upon rack of her latest book directed her through the store almost as soon as she came through the doors, and there was already a long line of people snaking away from a large table on the second floor, all holding copies of *Sensual Kitchen*. To Amy's amusement, more than a few of the people in the queue were middle-aged men. Well, if they couldn't get their pleasures the same way they used to, they might as well get them from food...

She started to feel uneasy when she saw that the table where Dominique was going to sit was almost directly below a coffee shop. The second floor was a mezzanine level, escalators heading up through a broad opening to the third floor, and the store's coffee shop occupied the whole of the balcony area looking out over the shoppers below.

Could somebody be killed by coffee? Amy thought about it for a short while, then decided that the chances of being killed by a drink were slim to say the least. But that didn't mean there weren't other potential dangers. The balcony might collapse, Dominique might get blood poisoning from accidentally stabbing herself with a pen...

"Jesus," she muttered to herself. While the threat was real, she was now totally overreacting to it. Just about anything could *technically* be used in some way to kill somebody, but some were more likely than others. On recent experience, flames, automobiles and sharp objects were the biggest dangers, and none were in evidence inside the bookstore.

She checked her watch. By now, according to what they'd been told the day before, Katie Astin should have arrived at her studio to record her show. She wondered how Jack was faring with her.

Should have bought him a cellphone, she told herself. Should have bought two, in fact. Her own phone had perished along with Donahue. At least, she assumed it had—and even if it had somehow survived she wouldn't have wanted it back. There had been a lot of blood splattered over the wall of his garage.

The book signing was due to start soon. Should she try to have a word with Dominique when the opportunity arose, or simply join the line to speak to her?

After seeing how much the line had grown in just the last few minutes, Amy decided just to wait and see what happened.

Dominique Swann disliked book signings. Yes, there was a certain amount of ego-gratification to be had from a non-stop stream of praise, that much was true. But the *repetition*! There was a limit to the number of times in one day she could hear the same banal comments over and over and *over* again without wanting to scream. Your recipes put the spark back into my love life. Where do you get your ideas? Do you (blush, smirk) use your own recipes to get you in the mood? The book's not for me, it's for my wife, but please sign it to me as well anyway.

Ugh. Somebody, please, say something *new* today.

Her PA for the day, a bright if somewhat nervous girl from the publishing company, was on her third coffee of the morning and already suffering the effects of excessive caffeine. "Is there anything else you need?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, I'm fine," Dominique told her.

"Anything at all?" added the manager of the bookstore, a middle-aged man called Frank who had, to Dominique's complete lack of surprise, been more than happy to let her use his office as somewhere to wait before the signing. As long as he could have a bit of a chat with her, of course. Since Dominique had dressed to impress as she always did for public appearances, today wearing a form-fitting peach silk blouse, tight leather mid-length skirt and black stilettos, the man could barely chat for drooling.

Which was another bit of ego-gratification for her, of course.

"I'm fine," she repeated, looking at her Breguet watch. It was already past the time for the signing to start, but being a couple of minutes late would add a little buzz to the event. She's late, I've been waiting here so long, is she even going to turn up, what if she's not coming... oh thank God, there she is! Dominique smiled, as much to herself as to the long line of fans waiting for her. It could be so easy to manipulate people sometimes.

Well, better get down to it.

As Frank and the PA escorted her to the table, she quickly ran her eyes up the line to see what the day had in store for her. As usual there was quite a large male contingent (and, as usual, she suspected that a fair number of the men buying her recipe books had never made anything more involved than spaghetti themselves, leaving the cooking to their wives), so she arched her back slightly in order to thrust out her breasts and exaggerate the wiggle of her hips as she walked past, which got the response she was after.

More importantly, practically everybody in the line was holding at least one of her books. At thirty-five dollars a time—no discounts on offer today!—and the generous royalty rate she'd prized out of her publishers, it would all add nicely to the already impressive amount of money she had in the bank. And she still had another two signings in the city later in the day.

Not bad going for a girl from Little Italy. Dumpy nobody to culinary sex symbol in eight years, all thanks to a bit of a diet, a lot of exercise, talent in the kitchen, a good hairdresser and some contact lenses. The smile that thought produced was all for herself.

She stood waiting for a minute, beaming at the crowd, while Frank gave her a very flattering (if over-egged) introduction that netted her a round of applause at the end. Finally sitting down, she took a quick sip of mineral water from the glass the PA had just filled, and looked up to see who was first in the queue to get their copy of *Sensual Kitchen* signed.

Surprise surprise, it was a middle-aged man.

Dominique paid even less attention to what was going on outside the rope barrier the store had set up to herd her fans than to the already repetitive banalities they were spouting as she cheerily signed their books—another thirty-five dollars, thank you—so she barely registered the Chinese girl hanging around nearby. She glanced up when the girl seemed to be about to duck under the barrier only to be stopped by one of the store's security guards. Some people just couldn't wait to meet her! But Dominique started to give her more attention when instead of being ushered away by the guard she urgently whispered something to him, and then actually became distracted when the guard led her over to talk to Frank. What was going on?

Frank, looking uncomfortable, moved to hover behind Dominique's shoulder as she finished signing another book, leaning down to whisper in her ear as the fan stepped away. "Sorry to interrupt, but, uh... this young lady," he tilted his head in the direction of the Chinese girl, "is a police officer."

"Police?" said Dominique. She looked at the girl, who seemed far too young to be a cop. "What does she want?"

"She says she needs to speak to you about something urgently."

"She's not here to arrest me, is she?" Dominique joked.

"Ha ha ha! God, I hope not." Frank seemed to break out in a sweat at the thought of the potential bad publicity. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"Is she *really* a cop?" asked Dominique.

"She showed me her badge, it looked genuine enough."

"Okay then," she sighed, "I'll talk to her."

Frank nodded at the guard to bring the girl over, then began to explain to the disappointed crowd that there would be a slight delay,

but Ms Swann would carry on with the signing in just a few minutes. The girl stood next to Dominique, leaning down and talking in a low voice.

"Hi, Ms Swann, thanks for letting me talk to you. Big fan of your books, by the way."

"Thank you," Dominique said dubiously, wondering what was going on.

"My name's Amy Tom, I'm with the NYPD—" She showed Dominique a police badge, which as far as she could tell was the real thing, "—and I need to tell you about something very important. Now this is going to sound very strange, and I don't want you to get alarmed, but..."

"You know, the first thing I do when someone tells me not to get alarmed is get alarmed," Dominique said. She'd had the occasional threatening letter from nuts in the past, which the police had always told her not to worry about when she'd reported them. But how could you *not* get worried when somebody you'd never met described in shaky-handed detail what horrible things he planned to do to you?

"Um, right. But please try not to. Okay, the thing is that... there's a chance that your life may be in danger?"

"*What?*" Dominique yelped, catching the attention of everybody nearby. "What?" she said, more quietly. "What do you mean? From whom?"

The policewoman, Amy, looked uncertain, seemingly gathering her thoughts before speaking. "It's kind of hard to explain. Three nights ago, a man we believe to have been a serial killer was shot and killed. We found a diary detailing his potential victims, and... we believe you were intended to be one of them."

Dominique felt faint, a chill wrapping itself around her. A *serial killer*! Then she realized exactly what Amy had said. "But... he's dead?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So... why do you think I'm still in danger?"

"Well, the thing is," Amy began, "even though he's dead, the first two people on his list have since died in... unusual circumstances."

Dominique stared at Amy, the unpleasant chill returning at the realisation that she was still under threat. "Do you mean he has an accomplice?"

Amy looked even more uncertain. "In a manner of speaking."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It, ah... Are you going to be anywhere today where you might be at risk of an accident?" Amy said, changing tack and, Dominique noticed, avoiding answering her question.

"I've got two more book signings, then this evening I'm having dinner at L'Opera... What do you mean, risk of an accident?"

"The two deaths were, er..." Amy paused, as if not wanting to finish the sentence. "Apparently accidental."

"*Apparently* accidental," Dominique said dubiously.

"Yes, ma'am. Dawson Donovan, the businessman, and Chelsea Cox from the news were the first two intended victims."

"Chelsea Cox?" Dominique hooted. "There was nothing *apparent* about that, I saw it on the news. She was hit by falling ice!"

"That's right," said Amy, "but there were some things that didn't make sense about it, the same with the second victim. It's, ah... it's almost as if the chain of events that led to each death had been set up deliberately."

Dominique looked away from the cop for a moment to check what was happening in the queue of fans waiting for their autographs. Although Frank had ushered the woman at the head of the line back a few steps, she was quite obviously trying to listen in on the whispered discussion, and the people behind her were showing clear signs of impatience. She turned back to Amy. "Sounds like they were killed by a giant game of Mousetrap."

"I'm serious here, ma'am," Amy said, a tinge of irritation in her voice that Dominique didn't appreciate at all.

"So what do you want me to do about it?" she demanded.

"Just, please, be *extremely* careful, and watch out for any object or situation that could conceivably hurt you. Flammable materials, knives..."

"You *do* remember that I'm a chef, don't you?" said Dominique, unable to hold back her sarcasm. "Flammable materials and knives

are rather essential to what I do!"

Amy's mouth twitched, giving Dominique the impression that she was choking back some sarcasm of her own. "All I'm asking, ma'am," she said in a rather strained voice, "is that you take every possible precaution to avoid accidents, and not just in the kitchen."

"Accidents happen, and there's not really a lot you can do to avoid them. That's why they're called *accidents*," Dominique snipped. "I mean, I could be hit by a bus the second I walk out of the store."

"Yeah, you could," Amy said, an undertone of meaning to her words that made Dominique all the more keen for the increasingly disturbing conversation to end.

"Look, detective," Dominique sighed, exasperated, "I'm glad that the NYPD is taking such an active interest in accident prevention, but don't you think you'd be better off spending your time catching murderers and rapists than holding up my book signings?" Something struck her. "Let me see your badge again..."

Slightly reluctantly, Amy took out her police badge and held it up for Dominique to examine. This time, she checked it thoroughly. "You're not even a detective!" Dominique exclaimed. Since Amy wasn't in uniform... "Are you even on duty right now?"

"Uh, no," Amy admitted.

"So, what, is this your *hobby*?" Dominique leaned back to look around Amy and gestured for the security guard to come over. "Thank you for your concern, *officer*, but I can take care of myself, and all these nice people in the line here are getting rather impatient. So if you could just *leave me alone*," the added emphasis was for the benefit of the guard, who was now standing behind Amy, "that would be lovely."

The guard reached out to put a hand on Amy's shoulder, but she flashed the badge, still in her hand, in his face. "Don't even think about it, buddy."

"She's not even on duty," Dominique told him. "And I've got your badge number," she added, turning back to Amy. "If I see you hanging around again, I'm going to report you to your superiors."

"It's your life," Amy muttered as she walked away, the guard following a few steps behind. Dominique watched her until she

disappeared from sight.

Well, *that* had been unsettling.

Frank addressed the crowd again in an overly cheery voice, apologizing for the delay and assuring everybody that Ms Swann was now ready to continue with the signing. For a brief moment, Dominique considered taking a break just to settle herself, or maybe even cutting the whole event short, but quickly came to her senses. She was here for a reason, to promote herself and her book, and she wasn't going to let some weirdo conspiracy theorist talking about bizarre accidents put her off, cop or no cop.

She gave the woman at the head of the queue her most dazzling smile and invited her to step forward, pen already in her hand ready to start signing again.

The guard stayed just behind Amy until she left the store, then waited inside the doors, a shadowy figure lurking behind the reflections on the glass, watching her, almost daring her to come back in. Not that she intended to. She paused on the sidewalk, pursing her lips in frustration, then set off down the block, looking for a cab.

Damn it!

Now she understood why Jack had experienced so many problems getting Donahue to listen to him. Not even the added authority of a police badge had been much help, and if Dominique—who'd been quite a sarcastic bitch, so that was the last of *her* books she was ever going to buy!—decided to make good on her threat and report Amy's behavior to her superiors, she was going to be in even more trouble.

It *did* sound insane, as well. Trying to convince somebody that seemingly random accidents were going to finish the plans of a now-dead serial killer? It still seemed ludicrous, even though she'd seen it happen twice already.

But maybe, just maybe, the warning alone would be enough, even if Dominique didn't believe her. Maybe.

Her wave caught the attention of a cab, which pulled up to the kerb in a spray of dirty slush. Being without a cellphone was already becoming a definite nuisance. She hoped Jack would still be waiting for her at Katie Astin's studios.

Jack stood around waiting on the sidewalk for some time after Katie entered the building, watching the line of people who were going to join the studio audience build up, before it occurred to him that there was a coffee house directly across the street at the other side of the crosswalk, he had money, and in his new clothes he wasn't going to be chased right out of the door the moment he set foot inside.

The hostile looks he'd got from Katie's fans, almost all of whom had joined the queue for admission to the studio, suggested that one of them would point him out to security if he tried to get into the recording of the show. Instead, he decided to try to speak to Katie again when she left. He had no idea how long it would take to tape the show, guessing that it would be at least a couple of hours, so he sat in the window of the coffee house and watched for the first sign of the audience filing out of the building or the return of Katie's limo.

In hindsight, he wished he hadn't got through his first cup of coffee quite so fast. If he were taking a piss when Katie emerged, it could cost the woman her life. Since he didn't know when she was going to show up, he was just going to have to hold it in.

Which rather took the enjoyment out of the *second* cup of coffee that he'd already started by then.

The coffee house was part of a franchise, all dark wood and standardized art bought by the yard, so there wasn't really much to look at. Instead, Jack spent his time watching people walk by the window. Everyone seemed in a rush to get to their destination, and he suspected the same would be true even on a glorious summer day rather than the freezing gloom of a New York winter. *Slow down and enjoy the moment*, he wanted to go out and tell them. *You never know when it might suddenly end.*

He was well into his third coffee and feeling the effects of the first on his bladder quite strongly when he saw the hot dog seller return, pushing his heavy cart into position right outside the doors of the studio building and kicking at a footbrake on one of the wheels. Presumably he knew when the audience would emerge and wanted to be there ready to sell them something to eat.

To hell with coffee—Jack had the urge for a hot dog himself. He abandoned what was left of his drink, left a couple of coins on the table next to the cup as a tip (he couldn't even remember the last time he'd had enough money to be able to do that) and headed out, waiting impatiently for the crosswalk sign to change from "Don't Walk" to "Walk." Cabs rushed past, trying to beat the lights.

Finally the sign changed, and Jack hurried across the street. A great cloud of steam rolled into the cold air as the hot dog seller lifted the lids of the boilers to check on his wares. Hot water bubbled away inside, frankfurters bobbing like kids in a swimming pool. Ordering a hot dog with everything on it, and finding himself unexpectedly salivating in anticipation, Jack idly wondered what powered the cart. Glancing down past the racks of chips and snacks and tourist tat hanging off the side of the cart, he spotted a pair of squat red gas cylinders. One trivial mystery solved.

"You set up here often?" he asked the hot dog seller, as he scooped onions onto Jack's meal.

"Yeah, three times a week," the seller told him in a raspy voice. "They come out of making a television show about now. Some Christian deal, so I'm told. Not really my thing, but I get a lot of business out of it, so hey. I guess they don't feed them in there."

"Guess not," said Jack, gratefully taking his hot dog.

"Found this spot last year," the seller continued as Jack started eating. "The girl's become very popular recently, I hear. Comes here in a limousine and everything. Even knows me, she does, says 'Hello, Harvey,' when she sees me. Polite young lady, she is. Very pretty, too. Kind of reminds me of my grand-daughter. Never buys a hot dog, though. Maybe she's a vegetarian."

"Uh huh," muttered Jack, mouth full of meat and bread and mustard. The seller kept on talking about nothing in particular for a

few minutes, only stopping when the first of the studio audience members came through the doors onto the sidewalk.

"Hot dogs! Get your hot dogs! This young fellow here'll testify to their goodness! Hot dogs!"

"They're okay," said Jack, stepping back and not really wanting to be used as a billboard. He watched the people as they left the building, waiting for any sign of Katie. A delivery truck pulled up, kicking up slush onto the legs of everyone waiting to use the crosswalk. A couple of them complained to the driver as he climbed out and took a large package from the back of the truck, but he just shrugged and walked into the building.

A few of the audience members decided to wait by the doors as well. Jack recognized them as the ones who'd been waiting in the cold for Katie earlier, and hurriedly turned away before they saw his face. He didn't want them starting a commotion and preventing him from talking to her.

Several minutes passed, Jack guessing that Katie was having her studio makeup removed and whatever else TV presenters had to have fixed before they could go from the studio and back into real life. The hot dog seller was doing all right out of the wait, though, attracting quite a few of the waiting fans. The cart squeaked and shifted as people pushed against it.

Jack looked down the street and saw Katie's limo waiting at the traffic lights on the other side of the intersection. Hurriedly wiping away a blob of fallen ketchup from his chin, he went to stand by the doors, ready to catch Katie the moment she appeared.

The limo arrived, the driver shooting a nasty look at the truck blocking his intended parking spot. The cabs behind him hooted their horns impatiently, so he accelerated away, presumably intending to turn around and park across the street, outside the coffee house.

The coffee house...

Had he imagined it, or had he just caught a momentary flicker of movement in the broad window, a reflection of something that wasn't actually there?

Another sign?

There was nothing moving in the coffee shop window now but the reflections of passing taxis.

A woman called out Katie's name. Jack turned to see her walk through the doors, immediately being surrounded by her fans. She looked around, frowning for a moment when she realized that the limo wasn't in sight, then smiled and started chatting to the people around her.

Jack stepped towards the throng. "Katie? Katie Astin!"

Katie looked around to see who had shouted her name, eyebrows arching when she saw Jack. "Are you still here, Jack?"

"Uh, yeah," Jack said, slightly surprised that Katie had remembered his name. "Look, I still really have to talk to you."

"Hey," objected one of the women, "you're that guy from this morning again! Why don't you get lost?"

"Yeah! Leave her alone!" added one of the big-haired women nasally. The mood of the group began to turn hostile.

"Now, please," said Katie, raising her hands, "everybody chill out! There's no need for things to get nasty, okay?" This seemed to placate the little crowd. "It looks like I'll have a couple of minutes before my car gets here, so I'm going to talk to Jack here and find out what's on his mind. Okay?" His followers reluctantly muttered their assent, opening out to let Katie approach Jack.

"I was kind of hoping to talk to you in private," Jack said, eyeing the fans, who were slowly surrounding the pair, trying to listen to whatever they said.

"I've got to admit, I'm impressed with your persistence, waiting for me out in the cold all this time." Jack decided not to mention that he'd spent most of that time in the coffee house. "Now, you said that you think my life's in danger?"

Jack gave a brief explanation of what had happened over the last few days, emphasizing the chains of bizarre "coincidences" that had led to the deaths of Chelsea and Donahue. Donahue's demise apparently wasn't very big or interesting news to the kind of people who watched Katie's show, but they all seemed to be familiar with the gory details of Chelsea's exit from this world. "And she was so

pretty, too," one woman noted sadly, as if that should have protected her.

"And you think that I'm going to be next to die from one of these... 'accidents?'" Katie asked.

"Yes," said Jack, "I do. I don't know how it's going to happen, or even exactly when, but I do think it's going to be soon, while the moon's still full. The guy whose diary we found wanted to do his killings while he was being watched by the eye of the moon. There's still time for that to happen."

Katie stared at him in silence for several seconds, before finally coming out with an extremely dubious, "Riiiiight..."

"I'm serious!" Jack protested. "If you don't take every precaution that you possibly can, random accidents are going to add up until they kill you!"

Katie's expression changed from disbelief to sympathy. "Jack, can I tell you something?" she asked, gently putting a hand on Jack's shoulder. "I'm afraid that what's going on here is that you have some... troubles, in your mind. And that's all that this is, it's in your mind. You see, the only being with the power to decide when it's time for a person to pass on is the Lord, and the Lord, I can totally assure you, doesn't play sadistic little games with his children."

"Well, maybe you can argue about that with Chelsea Cox and Dawson Donahue when you meet them," Jack snapped, irked by Katie's patronizing sincerity. The crowd didn't take this well, but she quietened them down with nothing more than a look before turning back to Jack.

"I can tell just from your face that you've been through hard times recently," she said, "and that you might need some help to get over all that. There's no shame in asking for help, Jack. And," Katie continued, picking up on Jack's feelings, "I'm not just suggesting that you should start attending church, although, y'know, that's obviously something I'd recommend to everybody. But my organization supports a lot of charitable groups that specialize in helping people just like you through their problems."

"I don't need help," Jack growled, shrugging off Katie's hand. "I'm trying to help *you*."

"Jack," said Katie, "listen to yourself. Nobody is trying to kill me. Now, I'm grateful that you want to help me, but death is not laying a series of traps for me, okay? It's all in your head. Now please, for yourself, let someone help you get past this. See the light, and feel the love."

"And feel the love," chorused the people around him.

Jack grimaced. "Christ."

"Exactly," said Katie, with a slight smile. "The love of Christ." A car horn attracted her attention; looking across the street, Jack saw that her limo had pulled up at the other side of the crosswalk, outside the coffee house. "Now, I've got to go. Just remember what I said, Jack," she added, over the disappointment of her fans. "Let someone help you." She stepped away, waiting for the lights on the crosswalk to change. Most of the group that had been waiting for her started to disperse, though a few were still trying to talk to her even as she waited.

Jack made a disgusted noise. What did he have to do to convince these people that their lives were in danger?

He kept watching Katie as she waited to cross the street, taxis whipping past in both directions. Their reflections were clearly visible in the window of the coffee house.

He *had* seen something there, he was certain of it. But what?

A taxi.

A reflection of a taxi, where there had been no passing traffic to cast it...

Katie was going to be run over by a taxi.

It seemed as if time slowed down. He looked in both directions, able to see past the delivery truck blocking Katie's view down the street. Her driver had got out of the limo, shrugging apologetically at not being able to park any closer. The traffic lights were at green, cars speeding through them.

A flicker of light ahead of him. A spark, a short-circuit somewhere inside the crosswalk sign. The bulb illuminating the word "Don't" pulsed, then died.

"Walk."

Katie stepped out onto the crosswalk.

The traffic lights were still green. Jack could see the taxi now beyond the delivery truck, a dirty slab of yellow cutting its way through the other cars to beat the lights.

He started to run after Katie, who was still walking into the street. Another step, and another, her heels cutting through the snow to click onto the blacktop, each tick almost like a countdown to her death...

Jack barged through the women who'd been talking to Katie, his view of the speeding cab now blocked by the delivery truck, just a second away...

Katie caught a flash of color in the corner of her eye, looking round to see the grime-splattered prow of a taxi rushing right at her, horn sounding like a sudden scream...

And missing, someone grabbing her from behind and hauling her roughly backwards.

Jack twisted to spin Katie around, away from the cab, as it rushed past. He felt the back of his coat being whipped up by the side of the taxi, an explosion of pain in his elbow as the wing mirror clipped his arm.

He released Katie, who stumbled backwards onto the sidewalk, tripping over the curb.

She crashed into the hot dog cart, bouncing off it to topple back onto the crosswalk, barely managing to raise her hands in time to break her fall. The hot dog vendor yelped and jumped back in surprise.

The footbrake on the hot dog cart suddenly sprang upwards as if kicked. The cart spun, still shaking from Katie's collision, and rolled along the sidewalk...

Towards Katie.

One wheel of the cart slipped over the edge of the curb, dropping several inches before it slammed into the gutter.

The cart tipped over. Steel lids and loose cans crashed down first, some clattering onto the crosswalk around Katie, others hitting her...

She looked up to see the cart falling towards her, a huge cloud of steam erupting from it as gallons of boiling water exploded from the tanks inside, a scalding wave pouring right at her face...

Jack scrambled along the crosswalk on all fours, just barely managing to seize hold of Katie's coat and roll her over as the steaming torrent hit the ground and burst into a superheated spray. He felt the heat biting into him as smaller droplets rained down on his skin, but Katie was shielded from the worst of it.

He jumped to his feet, pulling Katie up with him and quickly helping her take off her sodden, steaming coat. She gasped in pain, swiping at her legs where spots of the boiling water had splashed her pantyhose-covered legs.

"Are you okay, are you okay!" Jack demanded, ignoring the screams of one of the women. The hot dog seller was yelling, running to his overturned cart.

"My leg, my leg!" Katie cried, slapping at the back of her shin. Steam rose from her wet coat in the cold air. "Aagh! Jesus *Christ*!"

"Call 911!" Jack shouted to anybody who would listen. "Quick, damn it!" He saw one of the women delve into her purse for a cellphone. With luck paramedics would arrive in a few minutes, so Jack could try to remember the first-aid training he'd got in his old job to take care of the scald...

One of the gas cylinders rolled out from its rack in the overturned cart, hitting the street with a heavy clonk.

Jack stared at it. The hose connecting it to the burners heating the now-empty water tanks somehow unscrewed itself from the nozzle even as he watched.

"Oh, you've *got* to be kidding me..."

Katie heard Jack's disbelieving voice and looked down at the cart just in time to see the hose pop free.

Escaping gas hissed like an angry snake. A tongue of flame from the other burner, caught by an unexpected flurry of wind, somehow licked its way out of the innards of the cart into the open air.

Jack threw himself onto Katie as the leaking gas ignited, pressing her down onto the slush-covered sidewalk as the cylinder blasted at them like a rocket.

It barely missed Jack's head as he landed on top of her, the blue flame roaring from the nozzle singeing his hair. The cylinder

punched straight through one of the glass doors, leaving an almost perfectly circular hole before it smacked into a pillar and exploded.

Every pane of glass in the studio building's lobby burst outwards in a ball of flame, showering everyone on the street outside with glittering fragments.

Tires screeched as traffic came to a standstill, people shouting and screaming all around. The crack of the explosion echoed around the street before finally dying away.

Jack cautiously lifted his head, feeling pieces of glass dropping from his hair. Very carefully, he kneeled upright, lifting himself off Katie. She gasped, then staggered to her feet, the pain of her scalded legs now forgotten as she stared in bewildered awe at the hole which used to be the lobby of her studio.

"So," Jack said at last, "convinced yet?"

NINE

Amy had no difficulty in finding the building where Katie Astin's studio was housed. It was the one with all the ambulances, fire engines and police cars parked outside, a large crowd held back by uniformed cops and lines of police tape, and the pulverized remains of steel window frames hanging like broken teeth in a smoke-blackened hole in the wall.

Once she got through the cordon by flashing her badge, she had surprisingly little trouble finding Jack either. He was sitting on the back step of one of the ambulances as a paramedic treated what looked like a burn on the back of his neck.

"What the hell happened here?" she asked him, both relieved that he was okay and horrified at the number of people who'd been hurt. Whatever had taken place, burns and cuts had been inflicted on a good dozen New Yorkers.

"Well, the good news is that Katie Astin now believes me," said Jack, wincing as the paramedic applied a dressing to his burn.

"And the bad news?"

"She had to find out the hard way."

"Oh my God!" Amy exclaimed. "Is she okay?"

Jack pointed at another ambulance nearby. "Yeah, she's fine, or she will be. They're just checking her legs. She got scalded."

Amy pursed her lips. "Scalded? I thought there was an explosion."

"There was," Jack said. "Taxicab, hot dog cart, flying gas bottle, lots of broken glass... you name it, it's been happening. I think it's mostly just cuts that people have got, though. Nobody was seriously hurt."

"And what about that?" Amy indicated Jack's neck.

"Scorch mark. Nothing too bad."

"I still think you should come to the ER and get it checked out," said the paramedic, finishing his work.

"My medical insurance kind of ran out a long time ago," Jack replied, managing to force a sardonic smile.

"I wouldn't worry about that." Amy looked round to see a young woman whom she recognized as Katie Astin limping toward them. She looked far more pretty, more natural, in real life than she had on her poster. The effect was somewhat diminished by the fact that her pantyhose had been cut away so that the paramedics could apply bandages to her now-bare legs, leaving jagged flaps of nylon dangling out from the bottom of her dress. "Anything this man needs, I'll pay for. He did save my life, after all. Three times in about twenty seconds."

"What?" Amy asked incredulously.

"Long story," Jack told her. "Look, Katie, there's no need for that, I'm fine. By the way, this is Amy Tom, she's a policewoman who's been helping me. Amy, Katie Astin."

"Hi," said Amy, smiling. She shook his hand.

"Glad that you're willing to accept help from *somebody*," Katie said to Jack.

Jack gave her a look, then asked Amy, "What happened with Dominique Swann?"

"Ugh," groaned Amy, "I didn't get anywhere with her. She thought I was a nut."

"Well, so did Katie here until not that long ago," Jack pointed out. "Just hope we can convince her somehow without her having to find out the hard way."

"Well, she said that she was going to be at some restaurant—L'Opera, I think she said—this evening, so maybe we'll be able to catch her there."

"I know L'Opera. Maybe I can help you out there," Katie offered. "Public figure to public figure, so to speak."

Jack considered it. "Might be worth a try."

"Speaking of public figures..." Amy said, indicating a camera crew behind the tape that was clearly pointing a lens in their direction. "Jack, I think you might be one as well before too long."

"Oh, great." Jack shook his head. "That's just what I need."

"It might actually be," said Katie, almost to herself. Jack looked questioningly at her. "Look, why don't you both come with me to my office. I've got a proposal..."

Once the fire department had given the all-clear, the crowd of displaced workers began to file back into the building. Katie was at the head of the line, Jack and Amy following close behind and trying to dodge questions from the growing number of reporters and camera crews hanging around. Jack was startled when he heard his name being called out in addition to Katie's; he guessed that somebody must have seen the interview with him that Chelsea taped before she died, and recognized him.

"Just ignore them," Katie said, hurrying past a pair of building workers sweeping up broken glass. "We can work out a statement later if you want."

"What kind of statement?" Amy asked.

"Jack, you've just become a public figure!" said Katie as she ushered them into an elevator. Her voice was noticeably more businesslike than it had been when she was addressing her fans on the street. "You're a real-life hero, and people like to find out about heroes."

"I'm no hero," Jack mumbled, embarrassed.

"Jack," Katie assured him, "you just saved my life. Three times! If it wasn't for you, I'd be dead right now!" She shuddered at the thought. "That makes you a hero in my book, and I think most people would agree with me. Now, tell me about yourself. I want to know all about the man who saved my life."

Reaching the offices of Katie's production company on the fourteenth floor, Jack was further embarrassed as she waited for her staff to return, then quickly gave them a rousing description of how Jack had rescued her. "Heh, thanks," he managed to say as they gave him a round of applause. Katie then swept him and Amy into her well-appointed office, where, after a little prompting and prodding, he reluctantly gave Katie the story of his life.

"You've been through a lot, Jack," Katie finally said when he was done. "And you know what all of it tells me?"

"No, what?"

"That through it all, no matter how bad things got, you never gave in to despair. You kept on fighting." She fixed Jack with an intense look. "You had faith."

"No, I just didn't want to end up dead in a gutter," Jack insisted.

"You had faith," Katie repeated. "And that faith in yourself brought you here, and saved my life. Now, I'd call that part of the Almighty's plan, wouldn't you?"

"If you say so," said Jack, deciding not to argue. He didn't have the energy any more.

"I owe you a lot, Jack," Katie said, walking to the window and looking out across the street. "You could even say that I owe you everything. I want to make good on that debt." She turned to face him. "I want to help you get back on your feet, rebuild your life. Jack, I want to write you a check for as much as you need to do that."

Jack shifted uncomfortably on his chair. "I, uh, don't have a bank account right now..."

"I can make a phone call," said Katie, glancing at one of the telephones on her desk, "and you'll have one in five minutes."

"No, I, uh, really, I don't need your money—ow." He flinched and glanced at Amy, who had just jabbed him sharply in the side with her elbow and was frowning at him.

"Jack, you *know* you do," she said. "Stop acting like an ass. She's offering you the chance to have a new life. Take it."

"You know, Jack," Katie added, "pride is a sin..."

Jack considered it. Although reluctant to take a handout, he had to admit that Katie was right. It *was* only pride stopping him. And once all this was over, he could use the money to help others, people like Lonnie.

And, he was forced to admit, just a couple of days living with Amy, having a roof over his head, had made him remember what he'd been missing, how much he wanted to go back to having a normal life, where cold and abuse and hunger were not everyday miseries...

"Okay," he said at last. "Okay. I'll do it."

"Yes?" Amy asked, breaking into a delighted smile.

"Yes."

Katie brought her hands together. "Excellent! You made the right decision, Jack. So, we just need to work out what you need. Money, clothes, somewhere to stay..."

"You can keep on staying with me," Amy said. "If you like."

"Really?" Jack was slightly surprised, but pleased. He caught Katie's expression. "I've been sleeping on the *couch*," he assured her.

"Hey, none of my business," said Katie, raising her hands. "Just because I'm a Christian doesn't mean I can't be a progressive. It's not like I haven't... um, well, that's all in the past now." She seemed sheepish for a moment, before regaining her composure. "Anyway, we can work all of this out. Oh, there is one thing I'd like you to do for me, Jack."

"What's that?"

"I'd like you to be a guest on my show."

"Uh, I dunno..."

"It's the only favor I'll ask of you, Jack," Katie said reassuringly. "I want to show my viewers that real heroes exist, and that they can come from any walk of life. And maybe, hopefully, it'll remind people that just because somebody is *homeless*, it doesn't mean they're *worthless*." She looked pleased with the soundbite. "I can even ask the people watching do something to help them—donate money, food, time... anything that can make a difference."

"Okay," Jack said. He was still reluctant, not wanting to have to step into the glare of the spotlight, but if it meant there were a way he could help people... "Yeah. When do you want me to do it?"

"I'm actually doing another taping tomorrow," said Katie. "It was going to be a different topic, but I can reschedule the guests. If you're here at ten thirty, that'll give plenty of time for you to get ready. I know it can be unnerving if it's the first time you've been on camera, so I'll go through everything with you beforehand. If you want to come as well..." she added to Amy.

"Love to," she said.

"Great! Okay, so I think the only thing left is..." Katie held up a checkbook and a fountain pen, "...how much shall I make this out for?"

"You're gonna be a *star*!" Amy giggled as they left the elevator.

"Oh, God, don't start," Jack grimaced. "I'm only doing it as a favor to Katie, and because it might help some homeless people. I don't want to be famous, I just want to move on with my life."

"Well, you'll be able to now, won't you?" In Jack's pocket was a check for ten thousand dollars—"Just a downpayment," Katie had said—and a thousand dollars in cash, as well as a letter Katie had written to her bank after calling the manager directly and asking him to set up an account. Jack wasn't quite sure how to feel about being given more money in one morning, in cash alone, than he'd had over the past few years. He suspected that Amy would tell him to shut up and feel happy about it if he brought up his reservations, so he kept them to himself.

They walked through the lobby, men still cleaning up glass and a team of glaziers boarding up the broken windows as one of them measured the remains of the frames for their replacements. "Jeez. What a mess."

"But you saved her, didn't you?" said Amy. "And if we can get Katie to help, maybe we can convince Dominique Swann and save her too. Which just leaves our mystery rapper, and then it's over, right?"

"Apart from the sixth victim, but we still don't know who that is."

"The killer didn't know himself," Amy pointed out. "And since he's dead, he's not *going* to find out. So maybe we only have to worry about two more people."

"Maybe." Jack wasn't convinced. Part of the street was still cordoned off as the clean-up operation continued, so they turned towards the intersection to find a cab on the adjoining avenue. The road was clogged, horns sounding angrily at the blockage caused by the partly-closed street. "Anyway, we need to get to the bank first. I don't feel comfortable carrying all this money."

"Just keep walking, buddy," Amy said with a stern look at a guy whose attention had been caught by Jack's words. He hurried past them. "So what are you going to do with it?"

"I've got absolutely no idea. Buy a suit, I guess, if I'm going to be on TV."

"I can give you a hand with that. I'll tell you what looks good on you."

Jack smirked. "Compared to what I'm used to wearing, even a cheap suit from K-Mart would be an improvement."

"I think we can find you something a bit better than that," Amy said. She looked down the avenue for a cab, but all the ones she could see were occupied.

Through the sound of blaring horns, Jack heard a thudding bass beat, music pumping inside somebody's car. Something about it was familiar...

He tried to find the source, not listening to Amy as she said something about taxis. It was coming from the other side of the street. He stepped out into the stalled traffic, homing in on the bass.

"Maybe we should go over another block," Amy said. It took her a moment to realize that she was talking to herself. She looked round to see Jack walking between the cars and taxis, head turning back and forth as if searching for someone. "Jack? Hey, Jack!"

The bass was getting louder. Jack's gaze fell on a silver Chevy coupe, the driver's window slightly open, a hand with a cigarette hanging from two fingers poking out into the cold air.

"I don't take no shit from no motherfuckin' bitch..."

That was it!

That was the song he'd heard, the missing link in the clues leading to his vision. Jack broke into a jog, weaving between bumpers.

The hand disappeared inside the car, which edged forward into a gap that had opened up in the traffic. Oh, crap! He had to find out who was performing the song!

Amy had no idea what Jack was doing, but as she saw him break into a run, she knew she didn't have much choice but to follow him.

The Chevy pulled through the gap, weaving between a bus and a post office truck, and accelerated. Jack sprinted after it, cars behind him blasting their horns for him to get out of the way. He heard Amy yell his name but didn't look back, his eyes fixed on the silver car. Slow down, damn it, slow down, slow *down*!

He pushed himself even harder, managing to get within reach of the car and bang its trunk with one hand. He saw the driver's eyes flick up in shock to look at him in the mirror, then the car shot away from him with a cloud of fumes from its exhaust.

"Wait!" Jack cried. "Wait!"

The car pulled away, the sound of the music fading. Lungs burning, Jack started to slow down—until he saw the car come to a screeching halt. Traffic lights!

He raced up alongside the car, staggering to a stop by the driver's door. The driver, a white kid aged maybe nineteen, stared at him in horror, as if expecting to be dragged from his vehicle. "I got a gun in here!" the kid squeaked unconvincingly.

"Grab ma Uzi an' shoot that floozy, 'cause I'm a hardcore killa!" snarled the rapper, the bass thudding through the car.

Jack struggled for breath. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I only need to know one thing," he gasped, pointing at the center console. "What's that guy's name?"

"Four-Four Cal?" said David Tom, giving his sister a look of sarcastic pity that she could be so out of touch with pop culture. "Sure I know him. Everybody does. You pulled me out of class to ask me that? Not that I'm complaining. History sucks."

"Well," Amy said in her best I'm-patient-but-not-*that*-patient tone, which she'd had many years to perfect with her brothers, "I guess I'm not everybody, so why don't you fill me in?"

"How come you need to know so urgent, anyhow?"

"Urgently," Amy corrected. "It's to do with a case."

David raised an eyebrow. "Dad said you were on medical leave. Oh, and where've you been the last couple of nights? He was trying to get hold of you but didn't get an answer."

"I lost my cellphone," Amy told him impatiently. "And there's been a lot going on, I'll tell you all about it later. Four-Four Cal?"

"Oh, yeah," David grinned, "he's cool. He's the ultimate gangsta rapper, for real. He's got this awesome song, 'Don' Fuck Wid Da

Playa'..."

"Yeah, sounds great, and watch your language," Amy chided. She'd told Jack to go on to the bank while she went to talk to David. They were standing in a corridor of David's high school, the same one Amy had gone to several years earlier, and just being there brought back memories of hall monitors and glowering teachers. "What can you tell me about him? What's his real name, where is he...?"

"He's in prison!" David laughed. "That's how real he is. Jeez, you didn't even know that?"

"I guess I must have let my subscription to *Gangsta Rap Monthly* run out," Amy said, making a face. "In prison where? New York?"

"No, he's in LA. Doing five years for hitting some dude who dissed him with a baseball bat."

"Sounds like a nice guy," said Amy, disappointed. The killer didn't seem to have been planning a trip to Los Angeles, and as for breaking into a prison to kill someone... So much for that lead.

"He's cool," David repeated. "So why did you want to find out about him? You're not going to become one of those hip-hop cops, are you? 'Cause that'd be cool."

"You know, I really don't think that's me. No, we thought that he might be connected to a case because of a link with one of his songs, but if he's not even in New York, then it can't be anything to do with him."

"You know who is in New York, though?" David asked, looking thoughtful. "The Masta."

"The who?"

"The Masta! Duh! Masta Thugg?" David rolled his eyes. "God, you really have no clue, do you? Anyway, he used to be a rapper a couple of years back, but now he's this absolutely awesome producer. Four-Four Cal's one of his acts, and he guests on a couple of his tracks. *He's* based in New York. His record company is, anyway. Black Cap. Cap, as in popping one in yo' ass, not a hat."

Amy thought back to what the psycho had written in his diary. It hadn't *specifically* said that the rapper was the target, and thinking about it, could easily be interpreted as being about the writer, not the performer...

"Black Cap?" she said. "Okay, that's a big help, David. Thanks."

"No problem, Ames."

"Now," she said with a grin, pointing at the nearby door, "*you* keep it real by getting your ass back in that classroom..."

Jack leaned back to take in the full height of the building. He and Amy were in the Upper East Side, standing in front of a very large, very baroque and presumably very exclusive apartment block. "Y'know, this isn't the kind of place I would have expected somebody called Thugg to live."

"His real name's Cornell," Amy told him, "Joshua Cornell. The Third, no less."

"Joshua Cornell III? What the hell kind of name is that for a rapper?" laughed Jack.

"Guess we'll find out soon. If they let us in." Amy indicated the entrance to the building, which had two uniformed doormen standing at the top of the marble steps, beneath the canopy. As jobs went it seemed like a fairly horrible one, standing around in the cold to open the doors for a bunch of rich people too lazy to do it themselves. She hoped they at least got decent tips.

"You're a cop, they're not going to throw you out."

"I don't know about that," said Amy, biting her lip. She was already worried about what might happen if her superiors discovered she'd been using her police credentials while off-duty, and this seemed like exactly the kind of place that might take the time to check with her precinct that she was on legitimate business before letting her in. "But, well, let's see what happens anyway."

They walked up to the doors, the doormen politely but firmly moving to stop them from entering. "Can we help you?" one of them asked.

Amy already had her badge out. "We're here to see Mr Cornell."

The doorman pulled a condescending face as he looked at the badge. "I see. And may I ask the nature of your visit?"

"We just need to talk to him for a couple of minutes. It's not any kind of criminal investigation, it's just that some... information has come up that we think he should be made aware of."

"I'm sure we can pass it on to him," the doorman said. "If you'd care to tell us..."

"We need to tell him in person," Jack insisted.

"I don't believe I saw *your* identification, sir," said the doorman sourly.

"He's not a police officer," Amy said, "but he is with me."

"I see." The doorman was practically sneering now. "I'm sure you understand that a man in Mr Cornell's position and profession gets a lot of visitors who say that they absolutely *must* talk with him just for a *few* minutes on matters of *extreme* importance..."

"Hello!" snapped Amy. "White guy! Chinese girl! Who's also a cop!" She waved her badge again. "You seriously think that we're here because we want to become rappers? I *hate* rap music!"

A hint of a smile appeared on the doorman's lips, just for a moment. "Hmm. I see. Well, if you'll just wait a minute, I'll call Mr Cornell and see if he's available." He went into the building, the glass and gold doors swinging behind him. The other doorman took up position in front of them, watching Jack and Amy intently.

A minute later, the doorman returned. "Mr Cornell will be available in a few minutes. If you'll wait in the lobby until he calls for you..."

"That'd be good," said Jack, grateful to get out of the cold. He was impressed by the building's lobby, lots of marble and statues and gold leaf and stained glass, all in a mock—or, thinking about it, probably entirely genuine—Nineteenth century style. "Nice place."

"It's a bit gaudy," Amy objected, attracting a disapproving sniff from the doorman. "I guess money doesn't buy you taste. You need a hankie there?" she asked the doorman, whose next sniff was loud enough to cause an echo.

They waited for a few minutes before a phone rang, the doorman answering it and watching Amy and Jack disapprovingly before finally hanging up and saying, "Mr Cornell will see you now. The fifteenth floor, apartment A."

"Thank you so much," Amy said with a big fake smile as she headed for the elevator. "Come on, Jack."

The corridor on the fifteenth floor was just as elaborately decorated as the lobby. Jack couldn't help noticing that despite the size of the building, the floor only had two apartments on it, A and B. He wondered how much they cost. Millions, maybe even tens of millions. Masta Thugg was obviously doing well for himself.

Amy stepped up to the double doors of apartment A and knocked. After a few seconds, a deep, gravelly voice came through an intercom. "Yo. 'Sup?"

"Mr Cornell?" Amy asked.

"S'right. You the po-lice?"

"Yes, sir. Can we come in? It's important."

A pause. "Room on your right," the voice said curtly. A buzzer sounded, Amy trying the door handle and finding it unlocked. She entered the apartment, Jack following her.

The long, softly-lit hall seemed almost as bland as a hotel room. Several doors led off from it, but they turned to the one on their right. Amy pushed it open, stopping in the doorway in surprise as she entered. Jack almost bumped into her.

The room itself was overdone almost to the point of looking like a parody of a 1970s pimp's bedroom, though this was more of a lounge, several zebra-striped chairs surrounding a low circular glass table. An oversized and ugly stereo system, bristling with intense blue LEDs, was playing thumping rap music through large speakers mounted high in the corners of the room.

The velvet-walled decor wasn't what caught Amy's attention, though. Joshua Cornell III—or Masta Thugg, rather—was sitting on a chair that was almost large and imposing enough to be called a throne at the opposite end of the room. Both hands resting on the head of an ivory-and-gold cane, he coldly surveyed Amy and Jack from beneath a blue bandanna and a pair of wrap-around mirrored sunglasses. He was dressed entirely in black, a leather waistcoat covering a T-shirt cut to show off the muscles in his upper arms. Gold rings glinted on his fingers, and a chunky gold Rolex watch sat on one wrist.

"So," Thugg rumbled, one finger pointing at Jack, "you the *po-lice*?"

"*She* the *po-lice*," said Jack, unimpressed. "I'm just some guy."

"Some *white* guy," said Thugg, lips curling in distaste. "Don' often get no *white* guys in my place. Plenty of fine white bitches, though. They can't get enough of the Masta." His head shifted, a reflection of Amy in his sunglasses. "Muthafuck. You too fine to be the *po-lice*, baby. Sure you ain't here for the Masta too?"

"Oh, I'm definitely the police," Amy assured him, holding up her badge as she approached.

"Hmm. That's a muthafuckin' shame, baby, fine piece of Asian ass like you wasted with the *po-lice*. So." He slowly leaned forward, putting more weight on the cane. "What you want with the Masta?"

"You watch the news, Mr Cornell?" Amy asked, determined not to let this asshole intimidate her with his attitude.

"Check it from time to time, see how the powers be oppressing the brothers this week," Thugg drawled.

"Been watching it for the last couple of days? Seen anything on there about unusual deaths of public figures?" Amy pressed on. "Chelsea Cox being killed by falling ice on live TV? Dawson Donahue getting hit by a car in his own home? Caught anything today about Katie Astin almost getting blown up by a hot dog cart?"

Thugg raised an eyebrow behind his sunglasses. "Yeah, I heard. But it ain't no concern to me. They all *white* folk. And white folk ain't any problem of the Masta."

"Actually, it is your problem, Mr Cornell," Amy said, starting to get pissed off with him. "These incidents, these *accidents*... they're not accidents. They only look that way. But two people have died from them, another person almost did... and they were all on a list. A death list, Mr Cornell. And we think you're the next person on that list."

"Say *what*?" Thugg barked, his voice rising beyond a low growl for the first time. One hand moved from the cane down to the side of his chair.

"If you're reaching for a concealed firearm there, Mr Cornell, it better have a license," Amy said sharply. Thugg's hand quickly

moved back to its place on the cane.

"The fuck you mean, a death list?"

"You want to explain, Jack?" said Amy, letting Jack step forward. He quickly ran through the events of the last few days, detailing the list of targets in the psycho's diary, putting emphasis on the fact that the third person on the list had been Katie—and that Thugg himself was number four.

Thugg's expression was blank behind his sunglasses. "Man, that is some fucked-up shit," he said when Jack finished.

"That's what Katie Astin said," Jack told him, "though not in those exact words."

"And this white-bitch preacher chick, she believe you now, huh?"

"Yeah, she believes us, all right," said Amy. "You can catch her interviewing Jack for her TV show tomorrow morning if you want to drop in at the studio. I'm sure a celebrity like you'll be able to get a good seat."

"Shee-it," Thugg said, sitting back in his chair, "I never heard such a bunch of muthafuckin' bullshit my whole life. Death's gonna set up a bunch of little accidents to kill me? Fuck that! Thought you the *po*-lice, not the mo'fuckin' *X Files*."

"You know," Amy told him, feeling exasperated, "I didn't really expect you to believe us. We've had a lot of that in the last couple of days. All I'm asking is that you be extra-careful. Watch out for things that might possibly be dangerous."

"Every day's dangerous when you a black man in a white man's world, baby," Thugg replied. "And if somehow I do see any of this shit goin' down, then what?"

"Give me a call," said Jack. Amy looked at him, confused, as he took what looked like a coffee house napkin from his pocket and handed to Thugg. "That's my number."

Thugg didn't even look at the napkin, dropping it onto the glass table. "Well, you done said your piece. Anythin' else you want to tell the Masta? Or," he added, leering at Amy, "anything you want to give him?"

"I think we're about done," Amy said coldly. "We'll see ourselves out."

"You do that, baby," Thugg said as she turned. "Mm-hmm. Like I said, you a too fine piece of ass for the *po*-lice. You come see the Masta if you ever feel like a change of career, yo? Like the Cube said 'fore he turned family-friendly, fuck tha *po*-lice. You get me?"

"Absolute asshole!" Amy hissed as they left the room. "Can you believe that guy?" She opened the apartment door and stomped out into the corridor.

"Was he for real?" asked Jack. "I mean, what was with that room? It was like Huggy Bear on an acid trip."

"Like I said, money can't buy you taste." Amy jabbed at the button to call the elevator. "And when did you get a phone?"

"After I went to the bank, while you were seeing your brother. I bought one of those pay-as-you-go jobs. I thought it might be useful, so we can stay in touch."

"Wish you'd got me one," Amy said. "Mine got smashed with Donahue."

"Oh. I didn't think of that."

"Well, it still might be useful," Amy assured him as the elevator doors opened. "Maybe Masta Dickhead in there'll come to his senses and call you."

"Just hope he gets the chance," Jack said. The doors closed behind them.

Masta Thugg stayed in his chair in the reception lounge until the security monitor built into one of the room's cabinets told him his two visitors had entered the elevator. Once they'd gone, he stood and laid the cane down on the chair, taking off the leather waistcoat, the bandanna and the sunglasses and putting them on the table. He went to a side door and opened it, walking from the gaudy kitsch that he showed to visitors to the art deco splendour of his living room.

In here, he wasn't Masta Thugg. In here, he was himself, Joshua Cornell III. Graduate of Harvard, music impresario and very, very wealthy businessman indeed.

He picked up a remote control from the glass-topped table by his Eames chair and restarted the CD player. "Aida" burst from the speakers around the room in perfect clarity, as well it should considering how much he'd spent on the sound system. He turned the volume higher and higher, until the stack of CDs on the table started to vibrate.

He really ought to listen to them, he thought. Some were demos of artists and bands his A&R people had found, others were rough mixes of tracks being laid down by his existing talent—but after the bizarre conversation he'd just had, he didn't really fancy listening to another barrage of bragging gun talk and motherfuckers and gloating descriptions of violence against women. It might have made him rich, but his carefully calculated and targeted brand of music could sometimes be very tiresome to sit through. His most recent "Best Of" CD might be bringing in the money, but it wasn't something that he would listen to himself by choice.

He sat back in the chair and stretched his legs, putting his hands behind his head to enjoy the music that surrounded him, his system set up to mimic the acoustics of a genuine opera house. Predictably, he only got a few minutes of it before the phone rang.

"Yes?" he asked, knowing what it would be about.

"Mr Cornell, I'm afraid that Mrs Hassen has just called to complain about the noise," said Broates, one of the doormen. "Would there perhaps be anything you could do about it?"

Joshua sighed. He was living in a twenty million dollar apartment, and he still had to put up with whining neighbours complaining about his music. He glared at the floor, mentally placing Mrs Hassen in the path of the imaginary laser beams coming from his eyes. He'd found out that the miserable old bag had voted against him being allowed to move into the building in the first place, claiming that a rapper would lower the tone—yeah, right, and it had nothing to do with him being black, despite him being richer than anyone else in the place—and since she lived directly below him, she'd taken every possible opportunity to complain, sometimes when he wasn't even home to *make* any noise. Why couldn't death pay *her* a visit?

"I'll see what I can do," he told Broates, then hung up the phone. Christ. He couldn't even have the simple pleasure of listening to an opera without somebody interfering!

He got up and went over to the tall steel and glass shelves holding his stereo system and home cinema, picking up a pair of expensive Bose headphones and unwinding the coiled cable. One of these days, he was going to have to remember to buy a set of wireless headphones. The sound quality on these was fantastic, but the long cable was just unwieldy enough to be irritating. Donning the headphones, he plugged them into the stereo, twitching as the opera was transferred from the speakers and burst directly into his ears.

Okay, maybe it was a *tad* loud. He lowered the volume slightly. That was better. Pausing for a moment to admire the trio of framed platinum records on the wall next to the shelves, he adjusted the stereo balance until it was perfectly centered, then went back to his chair and sat down, swinging the cable over the table.

The music surrounded him, a familiar, relaxing presence. He stretched out again and closed his eyes, letting himself sink into the world of Verdi.

Joshua didn't notice as the cable of his headphones slowly began to coil up on itself, gradually tightening, stretching the cable. It was almost as though an invisible hand was gently twisting it. Every time he moved his head in time with the music, the cable shifted a little bit further across the table, getting closer and closer to the stack of CDs.

Damn it. He wasn't able to concentrate fully on the music—what those two had said was gnawing at him. No matter how ridiculous the story, there was something very distracting about being told that you were on a death list. It certainly wasn't the first time it had happened. He'd made a number of enemies in his rise to success, not least various West Coast rappers incensed that someone from the outside had invaded their territory (and market share), but that was all business, and in some ways good for the carefully manufactured image of the Masta.

But this was different. A psycho, planning to murder celebrities representing the poisoned senses of the city, and he'd been chosen to represent hearing? It sounded insane.

It *was* insane. The psycho was dead! Two deaths and one near miss. It was a shame about Donahue; Joshua didn't know him personally but knew *of* him as a fellow young New York millionaire—though that didn't mean anything. It was just a coincidence, that was all. Just a coincidence.

The cable continued to tighten, coils slowly looping over themselves like a writhing snake. It had now slipped across the table, stretched taut, one of the tangled loops pushing against the CDs. It didn't have enough weight behind it to move them, but the cable was still winding up on itself...

"So, what now?" Amy asked as they climbed into the cab that one of the doormen had flagged down for them. Maybe there were some benefits to the lifestyles of the rich and shameless after all.

"Go and meet Katie, then find this restaurant that you said Dominique was going to, I guess," said Jack. "What was it called?"

"L'Opera," Amy said, as much a direction to the cabbie as an answer to Jack's question. The cab set off through the snow, turning south at the next intersection to head back downtown. There had been a brief flurry of snow earlier in the afternoon, adding a fresh white layer onto the brown, grimy slush covering the city streets, but the skies had now cleared again. As the cab turned, Jack caught a glimpse of the moon above, still full, still bright.

Artemis was still watching.

But he'd warned Masta Thugg of the danger, so what else could he do? If the man didn't believe him...

They came to a stop at some traffic lights. Garish lights off to one side caught his eye, neon signs in a shop window. A record shop, posters and cardboard standees of various artists staring out at him from behind the glass. Most of them he didn't recognize; living on the streets for a few years had, he admitted to himself with a grim smile, not done much for his pop-culture knowledge. A couple, though, he *did* know. Madonna, U2... and Masta Thugg.

He suddenly felt cold even in the stuffy warmth of the cab. Was that a sign, a warning?

The shop next door was an electronics store, stacks of expensive audio equipment visible behind the metal grid of the security shutter. Illuminated red letters scrolled across an LED banner display, a parade of brand names followed by individual words. "Our... prices... are... always... falling." The last word stopped in the middle of the display, flashing on and off.

"Falling... falling... falling..."

A sign...

"Turn around," Jack blurted, the words coming out almost before he'd had a chance to form the thought.

Amy turned to face him, concerned. "What?"

"Turn around! We've got to go back, I just saw a..." He pointed at the shop window. The display had changed, cycling back round to the scrolling list of company names.

"Did you have another," Amy lowered her voice, aware that the driver was taking an interest, "vision?"

Jack was still staring at the electronic display. "Yeah, I did." He caught the cabbie's eyes in the mirror. "Take us back to where you picked us up! Fast!"

He was *definitely* going to have to buy a pair of wireless headphones—the weight of the cable kept pulling them down slightly on one side. Joshua tipped his head in almost subconscious irritation, trying to nudge them back into place with his shoulder.

The cable pushed harder against the CDs, sliding them slightly closer to the edge of the table.

Joshua frowned a little, eyes still closed. For some reason, he couldn't seem to get the headphones to sit comfortably tonight. He reached up with one hand to adjust them.

His hand caught the cable...

Joshua's eyes flicked open when he felt the cable suddenly twang, hearing a noise above the sound of the opera. He sat up sharply,

looking around the room for its source, and saw that the tangled headphone cable had just swept the demo CDs off the table and sent them clattering to the floor.

God damn it!

He pulled off the headphones, the glorious sound of the opera dropping to a faint, tinny background buzz, and got to his feet. One of the CDs had flown out of its case and was rolling across the room, managing to stay balanced on its edge as it veered and wobbled over the white carpet towards the wall.

Oh, now what were the odds of *that*?

Somehow, the errant CD had managed to roll right into the narrow gap between two of the shelf units holding his extensive array of audio equipment, as if pulled in by a magnet. He even heard a little clunk as it hit the skirting board. Great. The shelves were over eighteen inches deep, and so weighed down with components that moving them would be a big job, no matter how many hours he spent working out in his personal gym.

Snorting in annoyance, Joshua went over to the fallen CDs. Hopefully the one that had escaped would just be a demo from some wannabe, nothing important... He checked the CD cases. No, of course, it was the rough mix of the first six tracks from F-Q Mutha's next album, which needed his approval and comments in the next few days, making it by far the most important CD in the pile. He picked up the two parts of the broken plastic case, made a half-hearted effort to fit them back together, then went over to the shelves. He could see the disc in the gap, light glinting off its edge.

The gap was just wide enough for him to get his hand in, he thought. All he had to do was get a fingertip onto the disc, then slide it out.

Easy.

He kneeled down and tried with his right hand first, then awkwardly pulled it out. The CD was leaning against the side of the right-hand shelf unit, so to get a firm grip with a fingertip, he was going to have to use his left hand. It went against every instinct he had about getting greasy fingermarks on CDs, a personal *bête noire*, but on this occasion he was just going to have to put up with it.

It was a tight fit, but his hand slipped into the gap fairly easily. The rest of his arm, though...

Crap. All that working out might have done wonders for his muscles since he'd left Harvard, but his forearm quickly became a lot thicker than his hand. Was he going to be able to get his arm in far enough to reach the disc?

One way to find out. It wasn't as though he could get stuck, after all. The sides of the shelf were smooth. It would be a lot easier to pull himself out than squeeze in.

The band of his watch clicked and scraped against the shelf sides as he extended his arm. No problem. Just keep moving...

There it was—no, wait. What was that? Something had just brushed over the hairs on his arm.

He moved his head, trying to get a better look into the shadows, and realized that he'd just touched a loop of wire, one of several that had poked their way round from the rat's-nest hidden behind the equipment. With so much gear linked together he'd got a professional to install it all, and until now the tangle of connections had been out of sight. Now that he knew it was there, it was probably going to bug him until he got somebody to tidy it all up again.

Still, he could worry about that later. Right now, he still had to get the CD. Inch by inch, he pushed his arm deeper into the gap. It couldn't be much further, surely...

There! He felt the CD against the tip of his middle finger. Careful not to push it any further back, he teased the disc until it was flat against the side of the shelf, then firmly pressed his finger against it. Got it!

Now, he just had to carefully slide his hand out...

His arm wouldn't move.

What the hell?

He tried again. Above him, on one of the shelves, he heard a rasping noise as something moved.

"Come on," Joshua muttered. He pulled again, straining for a couple of seconds until something gave abruptly. The rasping noise was repeated, louder, followed by a metallic thunk.

Shit!

His watch strap had somehow got caught on one of the wires, the links biting into the cable. His attempts to pull himself free had just dislodged one of the pieces of equipment above him, dragging it back until it hit the wall.

"Son of a..." He tried flexing his wrist, to open up the links of the strap. No help.

Forget the CD. He pulled harder, struggling to rip free with brute force. Come on! It was just a stupid little piece of audio cable, how strong could it be? Things rattled on the shelves, another knocking noise as something else was pulled back against the wall.

If the equipment was being moved by his efforts, how come his arm wasn't going anywhere? How tangled up *was* everything back there?

"Come *on!*" Face twisting into a grimace, he jerked with all his strength once, twice, using his free hand for extra leverage. He felt his hand slip back, very slightly. There was another sound from above him, a high-pitched creak, then something on the shelves slammed against the wall with a very expensive-sounding crash. He'd worry about that later. One more try should do it, just *pull...*

Little accidents.

The words suddenly echoed in his head like the sound of a gunshot.

Joshua froze, then tipped his head slowly back to look up at the two shelf units towering over him. They were stacked with audio equipment.

Professional audio equipment. Unlike the everyday hardware that Joe Schmo could pick up at Circuit City, professional gear was designed to minimize vibration in order to give the best possible sound quality. And the best way to do that... was to make it heavy.

Very heavy.

Joshua had no idea exactly how much all the pieces of steel and lead-weighted kit poised above him weighed. All he knew was that right now, he suddenly felt very nervous about the possibility of it all coming crashing down on him.

"Oh, shit..." he gasped. Sweat beading on his forehead, he relaxed his arm and shuffled around, now side-on so that he could get his

free hand into the gap between the shelves. His fingers danced again, this time trying to release the catch on his watch strap. He could feel the edge of the metal on his fingertip, his nail not quite able to make firm contact with it. Come on, you bastard, come on, come *on*...

The catch flicked open. Suddenly freed from its hold, Joshua jerked back and landed on his side. Above him, something moved...

With a loud crack, the steel pins holding the top shelf in place suddenly sheared away.

An avalanche of equipment cascaded down, the weight from each shelf snapping the supports of the one below it, sending everything tumbling.

Joshua shrieked and kicked himself back from the shelves with all his strength, eyes wide in horror as the sharp, polished metal corner of his DVD-audio deck stabbed into the floor right where his head had just been, slicing through the deep pile of the carpet and right into the wooden floorboards beneath, kicking up splinters.

"Jesus! Fuck!" he yelled as more components smashed to the floor around his frantically kicking legs, bursting open and showering him with electronic shrapnel. Sparks flew as a tape deck's power supply popped and crackled, smoke coughing from it.

Joshua scrambled to his feet, hopping backwards away from the pile of shattered and smoldering equipment. Holy shit! Little accidents, his ass! There'd been nothing *little* about that!

But he'd avoided it.

Something moved...

One foot snagged on the headphone cable stretching across the room as he stepped backwards, tripping him. His arms windmilled as he struggled to keep his balance, his other foot coming down on the scattered CDs, which slipped over each other like pieces of ice...

The headphone jack sprang free from the amplifier on the undamaged shelf unit, "Aida" erupting into life from the speakers as the end of the tightly stretched cable shot at his face and smacked him right between his eyes, the final straw that lost him his balance.

Even as he toppled backwards, he knew he was going to land right on the glass table. *No way*, a part of his mind said, *no fucking way am I going to die like this*...

Almost without thinking, he threw his arms out sideways just as his back hit the table. The top was glass, but the frame was metal, and this and his near-instinctive reaction saved him. His powerful arms took his weight as the glass cracked and then burst apart under his back, huge jagged shards somehow managing to hit the floor points-upward, balancing there in anticipation for several long moments with their lethal spikes aimed up at his back, before gravity finally took hold and slowly tipped them over, tinkling disappointedly to the carpet.

"Huah!" Joshua let out a breath, arms trembling and aching where the steel frame was digging into them. He cautiously turned his head, flinching on finding another sharp glass spike still attached to the frame, a fraction of an inch from his eye.

"Yeah?" he asked it. The glass shard drooped sadly, then fell from the frame to clink down amongst its broken fellows.

Joshua remained frozen, suspended over the table for a minute with his muscles trembling as he tried to work out exactly how he was going to get out of this position. Montserrat Caballé continued to sing, oblivious to his predicament.

The phone rang.

"Shut the fuck up, you old bitch!" he yelled at Mrs Hassen below.

The doormen had proven less co-operative this time, refusing to allow Jack and Amy admission, or even to call Cornell's apartment to tell him that they wanted to see him again. Reluctantly coming to the conclusion that they were out of luck, they were just about to flag down another cab to go and meet Katie when Jack's cellphone rang. It took him a moment to figure out what it was.

"Do you think that's..." Amy began.

"It's either him or Katie, they're the only people I've given the number to," said Jack. He took out the phone, fumbling with the unfamiliar controls in the darkness of the street, and put it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"I believe you!" yelled Masta Thugg at the other end of the line. "I believe you, I believe you, I believe you! Get your asses back here and help me!"

"Be right there," Jack assured him, peering up at the building. Amy looked at him questioningly. "I think the Masta's just started taking us seriously..."

TEN

"That's a hell of a mess. You were pretty lucky," said Jack, looking at the pile of smashed stereo equipment on Masta Thugg's white living room carpet. Only right now the Masta was far from the master of anything, talking non-stop in a jittery voice that was light-years away from the ghetto growl he'd been using earlier as Amy examined his back.

"Lucky? Lucky? If you hadn't warned me, I'd be *dead*!" he said, sounding close to panic. "See that box there, the big silver one? You know how much that weighs? That would have landed right on my *head* if you hadn't warned me!"

"Keep *still*," Amy complained as he twisted his upper body to point at the offending item. "I want to make sure there's no glass in any of these cuts. But you're not helping."

"Whaddya mean I'm not helping?" yelped Thugg. "I almost just got killed! I think I'm entitled to be a little bit on edge after that!"

Jack walked over to the other, still intact shelf full of equipment, taking a look at the platinum records next to it. One of them had fallen from the wall and was resting at an angle against some extremely expensive-looking piece of hardware that he couldn't even identify, patterns dancing brightly across the LEDs on its front. He heard music coming faintly from somewhere, and turned what seemed the most likely candidate to be a volume control slightly clockwise.

"Opera?" he said as the music rose, giving Thugg a curious look.

"Yes, it's opera," Thugg replied almost sulkily. "Okay, yes, so now you know the big secret. Masta Thugg is just an act. Although I'd prefer it if you didn't tell the papers."

"Just an act, huh?" said Amy, finishing applying band-aids to his cuts and handing him a new T-shirt to replace his torn vest. "So you don't really think I'm too fine a piece of ass to be in the *po*-lice at all?"

"God, no. I mean, no, I don't think that way about—God damn it, you know what I mean." He covered his embarrassed expression by

putting on the T-shirt. "The Masta is just a marketing invention. The target demographic for Black Cap's acts isn't black urban kids, it's white *suburban* kids. The more extreme and controversial the lyrics, the better the sales."

"I'm impressed," said Amy, anything but.

"Hey, I'm not going to apologize for it," Thugg told her defensively. "I did an MBA at Harvard, and one of the first things they teach you is that you have to identify and target your market. White kids weren't buying black music because they cared about the trials of ghetto life or fighting The Man, they wanted to hear about 'hos and Uzis and bling. And annoy their parents. So I decided to give them exactly what they wanted."

"Pander to them, you mean." Amy folded her arms and regarded him coldly.

"Maybe. But it paid off." He gestured at the platinum records on the wall, making a face when he spotted the one that had fallen down. "Damn it!"

"So do we still call you Mr Thugg," Jack said, a little facetiously, as Thugg strode across the room to the record, "or..."

"Call me Joshua," he sighed. He picked up the framed record, making sure he didn't disturb the cracked glass, and stood it carefully against a very large bass speaker on the floor at his feet. "Joshua Cornell."

"The Third," Amy added mockingly. Joshua wheeled around.

"I'm not going to apologize for coming from a well-off family either," he said, with some force. "It doesn't mean I didn't have to work my ass off to get to this." He indicated the apartment, then looked back at Amy. "You can't tell me that you haven't had to work twice as hard as anyone else at being a cop—you're Asian *and* a woman in a white man's world. You don't get everything handed to you on a plate, not like *some* people."

"Actually," Amy said, seeing him cast a glance at Jack, "he's been homeless for the last two years."

"Haven't even had a plate," Jack added.

"Oh." The wind flew right out of Joshua's sails. "I meant, er, some people in a general, societal sense. Nobody specific."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Joshua," Jack said with a polite, if slightly exaggerated, smile. "I've had a lot worse said about me."

"Right. So, this death list," said Joshua, quickly trying to change the subject, "how many people are left on it?"

"Right now? Just Dominique Swann," Amy told him.

"The cook?"

"The same."

"I take it she's representing taste," Joshua said. "What did this psycho have against *her*? All she did was write a few recipes—how does *that* get you on a death list?"

"I think our boy had a few sexual hang-ups. But that's really not important. What is important is that we get to her." She checked her watch. "Shit, we're going to be late. We still need to meet Katie."

"Call her, tell him to meet you... where are you going?" asked Joshua.

"L'Opera."

"I know it. Nice place, great chef. You tell her to meet you there." Joshua smiled for the first time since his brush with death. "I can drive you."

"Slow down!" Amy squealed, as the Ferrari F430 accelerated to beat yet another red light, weaving around the hulking back of an SUV as its brake lights came on.

"Relax, I know what I'm doing," Joshua assured her. "I race in my spare time. Besides, we need to get there fast—it's a matter of life and death, after all!"

"Yeah, but there's no need to *tempt* it! Aah!" Amy winced as the Ferrari barely missed a bus, Joshua whipping past it with a light flick of his wrist on the steering wheel.

Jack was just as uncomfortable as Amy, but for different reasons, as he was crammed into the car's tiny back seat. Joshua's logic had been that if he were pulled over for speeding, it would help to have a cop in the front seat with an explanation. Which made sense, but it didn't make him any less cramped.

He had to admit that they'd made very good time, though. The Upper East Side to Tribeca in eleven minutes, though traffic, showed what an Italian sports car could do when combined with a pressing need to reach a destination. And a blatant disregard for traffic lights, speed limits and lane discipline.

"That's another thing that's great about this car," Joshua said, as relaxed as if he were taking a casual Sunday afternoon drive in the country. "There's no way the police can catch it!"

"Yeah, but it's not exactly inconspicuous," Amy warned him. "It's not like we'd have any trouble tracking down a bright yellow Ferrari!"

"You'd be surprised how common these things can get," said Joshua. "I've got a rule now—if I see more than two cars like mine in one day, I change the car. I like to be different. Anyway, this is a whole lot less conspicuous than the Masta's usual car."

"Yeah," Jack commented from the back seat, "I don't think I've ever seen a Humvee done out as a stretched pimpmobile before."

Joshua chuckled. "It's a hell of a thing, isn't it? I think it's the chandeliers on the front wings that really make it. Best thing is, because it's technically a promotional expense, I even get a tax deduction for it!"

"Oh, oh," Amy said, pointing ahead, "truck. Truck, trucktrucktruck!"

"Yeah, I've seen it," Joshua told her, rolling his eyes as he flicked the car around the lumbering garbage truck on the inside. Jack caught a flash of the "Donahue" logo on its side as they shot past. Clearly the company's operations hadn't been affected by the death of its boss.

Joshua jammed the Ferrari into a tight turn, the engine whining as he clicked down through the gears. Amy made a muffled sound of distress, grabbing the dashboard, and Jack slid sideways and banged into the wall of the cabin. "You okay back there, Jack?"

"Mostly."

"You'll be fine. We're nearly there now."

"Thank Christ," Amy muttered.

Another tight, fast turn and they were outside the restaurant, Joshua braking hard and slotting the Ferrari neatly into position in front of the valets at the door. "Luis!" Joshua called as he climbed out of the car, not even waiting for anyone to open the door for him. "My man!"

"Mr Cornell!" said one of the valets, a slightly tubby Hispanic kid. "I didn't know you were dining with us tonight."

"Unplanned visit," said Joshua, tossing him the car keys as Amy helped Jack out of the back. "Brought a couple of friends with me. Listen, can you do me a favour?"

"Course I can, Mr Cornell!" Luis said eagerly.

"Can you tell me if Dominique Swann is here tonight? You know, the chef?"

Luis looked over his shoulder at the doors of the restaurant. "She's in there right now, Mr Cornell. Arrived maybe an hour and a half ago, in a Range Rover. Sport version, fully kitted out inside. Very comfy. Excellent sound system."

"Sounds cool," Joshua said, waving Amy and Jack over. "Now, you take good care of my Ferrari, okay?" He pressed a twenty dollar bill into Luis's hand.

"Always do, Mr Cornell!" the valet replied cheerily, lowering himself into the car.

"Okay, she's here," Joshua told Amy and Jack. "So what do we do now?"

"See if Katie's arrived yet," Jack said. "Then, I guess, we just try to convince her that she's in danger. If we've got you," he nodded to Joshua, "and Katie to back us up, then maybe this time she might believe us."

"Hopefully," Amy added.

They walked into the restaurant, the maitre d' recognizing Joshua immediately and hurrying over to meet him. Jack looked around, impressed. L'Opera certainly was opulent, softly lit by dozens of crystal chandeliers. He eyed them suspiciously, wondering how much they weighed and how securely they were attached to the ceiling.

"Jack!"

He turned his head at the sound of his name. Off to one side of the entrance was a large lounge area with a bar along one wall, full of overstuffed couches and armchairs, people sitting around chatting as they waited for their tables to become free. Katie, now wearing a long burgundy dress, stood up from one of the chairs, waving at him. "There's Katie," he said to Amy as she walked over.

"Hi, hello," Katie said as she reached them. "Where've you been? You didn't say on the phone."

"Saving the fourth sense on the list," Amy told him, indicating Joshua.

Katie raised an eyebrow. "I thought you said he was a rapper?"

Joshua heard this. "What, so rappers can't wear Armani?" he demanded, pausing in his discussion with the maitre d' to examine Katie's outfit. "And if you're a preacher, shouldn't you be buying your clothes at Polyester-R-Us, not Bloomingdale's?"

"Katie Astin, Joshua Cornell. Joshua Cornell, Katie Astin," Amy said, stepping in to make introductions before things blew up. "Joshua, any luck?"

Joshua turned back to face the maitre d', a fussy little white-haired man who looked somewhat unhappy. "I'm sorry, Mr Cornell, but since you haven't booked for tonight, I really can't simply let you and your friends in to talk to Ms. Swann... I'm sure you understand, we would do exactly the same for you if the positions were reversed, to protect your privacy."

"I completely understand, Gunther," said Joshua, reaching into his jacket pocket. "On the other hand, if a table were to suddenly become available, then we'd be able to go into the dining area, wouldn't we?"

Gunther's eyes flicked down to the hundred dollar bill that had just appeared in his hand. He licked his lips nervously. "Ah, perhaps, Mr Cornell..." He looked over at the people waiting in the lounge. "But there are quite a lot of people already waiting..."

Another hundred joined its companion.

"But I'll see what I can do," Gunther said quickly. "Please wait, I'll be back in a moment." He scurried down the wide steps that led into the main dining room.

"Boy, I love being rich," smiled Joshua. His broad grin froze and faded as he looked around at Jack. "Heh. Sorry."

"No problem," said Jack, blank-faced.

"Did you get to the bank okay, open the account?" Katie asked him.

"Yeah, got everything sorted out fine."

Joshua cocked an eyebrow at Jack. "You got a bank account? I thought you were homeless."

"I put in a good word for him," said Katie. "It was the least I could do for the man who saved my life."

"And what did you *put* in this bank account?"

"I took care of that as well," Katie continued. "Like I said, it was the least I could do."

"Jesus." Joshua turned to Amy, tutting. "You see what I mean about white folks getting everything handed to them on a plate?"

"He saved *your* life, too," Amy snapped, a bit more harshly than she'd intended.

"Hey, I'm joking!" Joshua said. "Christ, I almost suffered death by stereo tonight, I think I'm entitled to try and lighten the mood."

"Jack saved *my* life today, too," Katie pointed out. "What have you given him by way of thanks?"

"A ride in my Ferrari?" Katie made a huffing noise and shook her head.

Joshua seemed as though he was about to come up with a rude response when Gunther returned, trotting quickly up the steps. "Mr Cornell," he began, pleased with himself, "it turns out that a table has become available after all."

"Well, isn't that a thing?" Joshua said to the little group in a smug tone.

"It's not in the best location, being right by the kitchen doors... but I understand you're not going to be here for long."

"Just long enough to grab some breadsticks, Gunther. The prices you charge, they're bound to be the best breadsticks my friends here have ever tasted, right?"

"I think so, Mr Cornell," the maitre d' simpered.

"Great." Gunther was certainly doing well out of the evening, Jack noted, as yet another hundred dollar bill found its way into his hand.

"Now, about Dominique Swann..."

"I'll point her out to you on the way to your table, Mr Cornell." Gunther took a closer look at Jack. "I'm sorry, sir, but we do have a dress code—a tie for the gentlemen..."

"Any chance we could waive that dress code just for ten minutes?" Joshua was already reaching into his jacket again.

"I believe so. Just for ten minutes, of course." Gunther slipped the bills into a pocket, then took a step back to address them all. "If you'll follow me, please?"

The maitre d' led them down the steps into the marble-floored main dining room, which in terms of opulence made the lounge they'd been in look as cheap as a burger bar by comparison. Soft orange light from little oil lamps on each table glinted off the chandeliers overhead. A string quartet played soothingly on a small raised stage in one corner of the room. The sight and smell of exquisitely prepared food instantly made Jack hungry. He imagined that a meal here would have cost him a week's wages even when he'd had a job, though.

Joshua paused a couple of times as they snaked through the tables to greet people he recognized, and even Katie said a hello to a group of people they passed. "This isn't a networking occasion," Amy grumbled, annoyed at the delays. The far end of the room was divided into semi-private dining areas, and she'd spotted Dominique in one of them.

Gunther led them to a table on one side of the dining room, as he'd said close to the kitchen doors, on which a waiter was hurriedly placing cutlery. "Oh," he said, feigning surprise. "It would appear your table isn't quite ready, Mr Cornell."

"That's okay, Gunther. I've just seen somebody I can talk to while we're waiting," Joshua told him, twitching his head to tell the maitre'd it was time to get lost.

"Of course, Mr Cornell." Gunther backed away, smiling.

Amy looked at Dominique's table. She was sitting with four other people, two men and two women, all dressed to impress. The group was apparently nearing the end of its meal, the only cutlery

remaining in front of them being for desserts. A drinks trolley was pushed against the circular table.

Dominique was clearly holding court, the others nodding and laughing along as she talked, a small glass of some sort of liqueur in her hand. "Well, there she is," Amy said, taking a breath. "So, who wants to go ruin her meal?"

"She already knows you," Jack pointed out.

"Which is *exactly* why somebody else should probably go first..."

"Okay, okay," sighed Jack, seeing Katie and Joshua exchanging glances as if daring each other to speak first. "I'll do it." He walked over to Dominique's table and stood by the drinks trolley. Dominique didn't even notice him standing there, so he cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Ms Swann?"

"Call me Dominique," she said without looking around, then giggled, getting a sycophantic round of chuckles from her companions. Her voice was slightly slurred, and the flush of her cheeks made Jack wonder how many drinks she'd had. She finally registered his presence and looked up. "Hello." She did a double-take and ran her gaze up and down him, adding in a more sultry tone, "Oh, *hello*," the tip of her tongue sliding suggestively around the corner of her glossy red lips. Her friends all stared up at him as well.

"Hi," said Jack, aware that Amy had crossed her arms and was frowning at Dominique from behind Joshua. "Dominique. I just wondered if I could talk to you for a minute."

"As long as it's not about your grandmother's *fabulous* recipe for blueberry cobbler," Dominique purred. Her friends chuckled at what was obviously a private joke.

"Er, no."

"Good, good. Here, let me get a pen... does anybody have a pen?"

"A pen?" Jack asked. Both of Dominique's male companions fumbled in their jacket pockets, producing fountain pens and thrusting them at her as if in formation. "Oh. No, no, I don't want your autograph."

"You don't?" pouted Dominique.

"Ja-ack," Amy growled impatiently, waving a hand for him to hurry up. Dominique looked round at the sound of a new voice,

giving Joshua the once-over before her eyes settled on Amy.

"Aren't you... hey!" Her expression changed from a pout to a scowl. "You're that lunatic from this morning! That cop!"

"Er, yeah, she's with me," Jack said.

"What lunatic?" one of the women with Dominique asked. "You didn't tell us you had a stalker!"

"You know you've hit the big time when you get your very own stalker," added one of the men.

"I'm *not* a stalker!" Amy said, offended. "I'm a cop!"

Jack realized things were getting out of control. "Look, it's very important that we talk to you."

"Oh, God!" snorted Dominique. "Don't tell me you believe that I'm about to die as well!"

"Yes," Jack said simply. "I do."

Katie stepped forward. "I'd listen to him, Miss Swann—love your recipes, by the way. I would have died today myself if it hadn't been for Jack. He risked his own life to save mine." One of the two men at the table muttered something to his friend, apparently recognizing her.

"Me too," said Joshua. "These two came to see me, told me what they told you. I didn't believe a word of it and kicked them out. Next thing I knew, my hundred thousand dollar sound system turns into a deathtrap and I miss getting my head crushed by *this* much." He held up his thumb and forefinger barely an inch apart. "I'd take them seriously."

"And why should we take *you* seriously?" the other man at the table demanded.

Joshua gave him a narrow-eyed smile. "Because I'm the richest dude in this room by about twenty million dollars, that's why."

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Dominique snapped. She sat up, clicking her fingers in the air. "Waiter! Waiter! Yes, you!"

"Can I help, ma'am?" asked the white-jacketed waiter as he hurried over.

"Get the maitre d', please," she demanded. The waiter nodded and headed off to find Gunther.

Jack watched him go helplessly. "Listen," he finally said, turning back to Dominique, "we're absolutely serious about this! Two people are dead already, two more," he indicated Katie and Joshua, "were almost killed, and would have been if we hadn't been there to warn them—and if you don't take precautions, if you don't watch out for every possible danger, then you'll be next."

"I'll be next," repeated Dominique. She looked at Amy. "Accidents, you said, didn't you?"

"That's right," Amy answered.

"*Bizarre* accidents, yes?" Amy nodded. "So," Dominique continued with a sneer, "what you're saying is that I could die at any moment because, because this chandelier," she tipped her head back and pointed at the ceiling, "could just fall on my head at any moment, or... or this oil lamp," she tapped at the bowl-shaped lamp on the table in front of her with a red-painted nail, "could blow up in my face and kill me. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Jack. He was still looking at the crystal chandelier above Dominique. Reflections glittered within it, reflections of flames... that didn't exist. Yet. "There's going to be a fire, somehow. And if you don't find some way to avoid it, it's going to kill you."

Genuine concern appeared on Dominique's face for the first time. There was something about this man's certainty, the sense that he believed that was he was saying was inevitable, that she suddenly found very unsettling. Even though she had absolutely no intention of believing it herself.

The silence around the table that followed Jack's words was broken by the arrival of Gunther, who appeared with the waiter in tow. "Is there a problem here, Mr Cornell?" he asked Joshua.

"Not for me," Joshua said, "but you might want to have a fire extinguisher handy." The maitre d' looked confused.

"Hello? Hello! I'm the person who called for you!" Dominique shrilled. "These people are disrupting my meal and upsetting my friends. And me, for that matter. Can you get rid of them?"

Gunther looked pained. "Mr Cornell is a regular patron of this establishment..." he said feebly, gesturing at Joshua.

"And so is everyone sitting at this table!" Dominique said. "And more to the point, one of the people at this table—*me!*—is a personal friend of every single restaurant critic in the city! Now, you wouldn't want me to start writing about how your supposedly exclusive establishment lets just anybody come in off the street and start ruining people's evenings, would you?"

"No, ma'am," said the chastened maitre d'. "I'm really very sorry, Mr Cornell, but I'm going to have to ask you and your friends to leave Ms Swann alone." He leaned closer to Joshua, whispering, "This isn't why I let you in, sir. I thought you just wanted to speak to her, not to disrupt her evening."

"Well, Gunther, that's too bad, but the thing we needed to talk to her about isn't exactly conducive to a great dining experience," Joshua replied. "Somebody telling you that you might die today won't do much for your digestion."

"You told her she..." Gunther looked appalled. "Mr Cornell, that's... that's not really appropriate dinner conversation."

A waiter arrived with a tray bearing five small bowls containing various desserts. He stopped short when he reached the group of people standing by the table, looking to Gunther for instructions.

"Well?" demanded Dominique. "Are you going to get rid of them, or just let them stand there while we eat our desserts?"

The maitre d' held out his hands, trying to shepherd Jack, Amy, Katie and Joshua away from the table. The waiter who'd arrived with him took the cue and moved to act as a block between them and the table, ushering them away. "I'm sorry, Mr Cornell, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist that you and your friends leave the dining room. If you'll please let the waiter through..."

Jack reluctantly moved aside, the waiter looking over his shoulder in puzzlement about what was going on before starting to set out the bowls in front of the diners.

"You're *seriously* going to throw me out?" Joshua asked in disbelief. "You do remember who I am, right? You remember my face? Black, businessman, worth about a hundred mil, very influential in the entertainment industry? Ring any bells?"

"I'm really, really sorry, Mr Cornell," said Gunther, looking genuinely pained as he backed away, trying to get them to follow him, "but I can't let people ruin the evening for our patrons, no matter who they are. Maybe you could wait in the lounge area, enjoy a drink on the house?"

Joshua was unswayed. "Ha! See if I come here again. Man, I don't even *like* French food!" He started to follow Gunther back through the dining room, past the curious looks of other diners nearby. The waiter behind Jack didn't say anything, but made it very clear from his attitude that he expected the others to follow him. With a final glance back at Dominique, who was quite deliberately holding her head high and looking in another direction, he set off in Joshua's wake.

"Well, that was... weird," said Bethany, flicking back her hair and looking askance at the strange bunch being led away by the maitre d'.

"I'd go a bit further than just *weird*," Dominique frowned at her friend. Now that she thought about it, the earnest one of the group, the woman in the velvet dress, seemed familiar. She'd definitely seen her face somewhere, not just in a casual meeting but in a picture—or even on a TV screen. Was she an actress or something? And the way the maitre d' had grovelled to the black guy suggested that he was telling the truth about being a rich regular at L'Opera.

Was there something to what they'd said after all?

There couldn't be! It was insane.

Though she did carefully push the oil lamp on the table a bit further away from her.

"I wouldn't worry about it, D," Peter said. "The man was obviously wrong in the head."

"He didn't even have a tie," sniffed Edward. "I mean, how are you supposed to take seriously someone who can't even dress for dinner?" The comment produced a little round of self-satisfied laughter around the table, but Dominique was feeling less than amused.

Laura picked up her glass and finished off her liqueur, reaching for the bottle on the drinks trolley to refill it. "Just forget about it, Dom. Have your dessert, that'll take your mind off it. Oh, and have some more of this as well." She shook the bottle, an ornately decorated brick of blue glass, at Dominique, who waved it away. Laura made an "oh well" face, added another shot to her own glass, and unsteadily replaced the bottle on the trolley.

"Looks nice, D," said Peter, examining the *marquise au chocolat et amaretto* in his bowl. Of course, the two men had gone with what she was having. Dominique hadn't decided if she was ever going to stop toying with them and just have sex with either of them. Or maybe both. Or neither. It was a lot of fun, with the thrill of power, being an object of desire.

But right now, what she desired most was a spoonful of the marquise. She took a moment to assess the presentation, which more than met up to her standards, then dug in her spoon. Nice, firm consistency, moist without being stodgy, the nuts well mixed in. She wouldn't have expected anything less from L'Opera and Chef Moré, but it didn't hurt to check, to keep them on their toes.

She lifted the spoon to her lips and slowly eased it into her mouth, letting her tongue slowly absorb the taste. Oh, yes. Now *that* was good. Her friends caught the approval on her face, and started on their own desserts. Hmm. Had Chef Moré added a little extra something to his recipe? There was a hint of nutmeg, or maybe...

Something caught in her throat. She coughed slightly to dislodge it, but nothing happened. Instinctively she tried to draw in more air, which only served to pull the blockage tighter. Her eyes widened as she found she couldn't breathe. Raising the fingers of her free hand to her throat, she tried to force what air was in her lungs out to free the glob of food that was now choking her, but nothing emerged from her throat apart from a gasp so tiny even she could barely hear it.

Edward flicked an eyebrow as he saw her expression change. "Ah. Maybe I should have had the glacé instead. Dominique?"

Dominique flapped her hands at her throat, twitching in her chair as she struggled for the air that could no longer reach her lungs. "Dominique!" she heard Edward repeat, worry now in his voice.

The thing in her throat seemed to be growing, moving, twisting inside her to wedge itself more tightly into her windpipe. She tried to stand, banging an elbow painfully against the table as her chair refused to move, sticking to the floor. Her mouth was wide open, desperately trying to draw a breath.

The chair still wouldn't move. She hit the table again, Peter's wine glass toppling over. The music from the string quartet turned hollow, echoing. She stared in terrified disbelief at the faces watching her, the faces staring back in blank incomprehension, voices repeatedly saying her name. *Do something!* she silently begged them. *I'm fucking choking, help me!*

The chair finally moved, as if pulled free of mud. Dominique struggled upright, a growing rushing noise in her ears muffling the crash as she jolted the table with her hip. All the glasses were knocked over this time, the oil lamp rolling away on its side and dropping to the marble floor. Something fell off the drinks trolley and smashed. Bethany clutched her hands to her face, looking as though she were screaming, but all Dominique could hear now was a pounding hiss, pulsing in time with the burning pain in her chest and the crushing weight on her lungs.

Red lines of veins throbbed in her vision, which was becoming obscured by a dark haze roiling in from the edges...

Something bumped against her, hard. She felt a tightness around her, someone taking hold of her from behind and squeezing...

And squeezing again, harder...

She felt the thing in her throat move slightly, but no longer had the strength to react...

Squeeze...

Amy desperately tried the Heimlich maneuver one last time, following her first aid training to try and force the blockage out of Dominique's throat. If it didn't move this time...

Dominique coughed, a sharp exhalation that blew a lump of something half-chewed out of her mouth like a bullet. It hit a blue

bottle on the drinks trolley hard enough to make it wobble.

"Jesus!" Amy cried, full of sudden relief that it had worked. Dominique convulsed in her arms, drawing in a huge whooping breath of air. Then another. She was all right!

Unnoticed by anyone in the commotion, the liqueur bottle wobbled for longer than it should have, each swing *bigger* than the one before, not smaller. It paused for a moment, almost perfectly balanced on one edge of its square base... then tipped over onto its side. The cap popped off; alcohol trickled out, splashing onto the marble floor below.

Forming not a pool, but a stream, which in total defiance of nature began to wind its way deliberately across the hard stone tiles...

Dominique slumped to her knees, still sucking in deep, painful yet wonderful gulps of air. "Thank..." she struggled to force out, "thank you..."

"No problem," came the reply. A female voice, and it definitely wasn't Bethany or Laura. She woozily turned her head, to see the female cop crouching next to her, looking concerned but also quite pleased with herself. "How are you feeling? Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm fine," she managed to say. She heard running footsteps clapping on the marble, and looked past the cop to see the maitre d', who looked terrified. As well he might; having a celebrity chef almost choke to death on one of your dishes was not good publicity.

"My God, my God!" he squealed. "Ms Swann, are you all right?"

Dominique's strength was starting to come back. She pushed herself upright, kneeling up. "I'm okay. Just a nut, got caught in my throat. I'm okay now."

The stream of alcohol slid towards Dominique, somehow gathering pace even on the level surface, like a serpent impatient to reach its prey. It touched the hem of her dress, pausing just long enough to begin soaking into the material, then continued on its way, sliding between her legs and curving back towards the table.

Something suddenly occurred to Jack. His eyes darted over the table, taking in the overturned glasses. Where was the oil lamp?

Amy held out a hand to Dominique, to help her to her feet. "Just a minute," came the reply, her voice still weak. "I just need a moment..."

The stream was moving in an almost straight line now, heading for the oil lamp, which had rolled under Edward's chair and was resting, unnoticed, against one of its legs.

Jack tried to spot the oil lamp. It wasn't on the table, which meant it was either on one of the chairs—Dominique's dinner companions were all standing now, gawping ineffectually at her and Amy—or, more likely, on the floor. Ignoring the questioning looks from the people around him, he bent down, hunting for the telltale flicker of orange light.

There!

Nowhere near Dominique, fortunately, and on a marble floor there was very little chance of it setting fire to anything even if any of the oil had spilled. The stone around it seemed dry, though.

Except for...

The advancing trail of liquid from the liqueur bottle reached the fallen lamp. A slight breeze arose from nowhere as though somebody had walked past, disturbing the quietly burning flame coming from the oil-soaked wick. For a moment, it fluttered downwards. Fire touched the stream of highly flammable alcohol...

Jack saw the flash of ignition, the streak of blue fire racing across the floor.

Straight for Dominique.

Amy caught the unexpected light in the corner of her eye and looked around to see what had caused it. She was just in time to see the line of flame charge past her, narrowly missing her feet as it rushed straight for the now alcohol-sodden patch of Dominique's dress...

Dominique saw the flash of fire too, but was too shocked to react.

She didn't have to. Jack lunged at her, bending down to grab her around her chest and then straightening to yank her cleanly off the floor just as the flame reached her. The blue blaze tried to stretch up from the small puddle that had formed against Dominique's leg, clawing for a hold on her dress...

But it was too late. She was clear.

Jack set Dominique down on her chair, worried that he might have hurt her when he picked her up. "Are you okay?"

Dominique was gasping for breath again. "I, uh... I think so..."

"You didn't get burned?"

"No, I... I'm okay." Her eyebrows rose as events sank in. "I'm okay!"

"Mm-hmm," said Joshua, in an I-told-you-so tone. He pointed to Jack and Amy. "Didn't I tell you these guys were for real?"

Dominique nodded at him, then opened her mouth wide to take in a deep breath of relief.

Amy looked at the trail of flame, which was still flickering. "Somebody better get a fire extinguisher."

The fire continued on past where Dominique had been kneeling, following the trail of alcohol back to its source: the overturned bottle on the drinks trolley, which was continuing to trickle out its contents. It was still over a third full.

Blue flame reached the bottom of the falling liquid, paused for a moment, then sprang upwards, racing greedily for the reservoir of almost neat alcohol inside the bottle...

The bottle exploded.

The glass was quite thick and heavy through most of the brick-shaped blue container. The thinnest part was where the top curved up to form the neck. As a whole, it withstood the sudden explosion surprisingly well. A couple of people nearby—Gunther, a waiter, Laura—were hit by random shards.

But by containing the explosion, the bottle channeled the force of the blast in one direction: through the weak, thin glass around its top.

The neck of the bottle was blown free, a dense cylinder of blue glass with jagged, sheared edges at its base, whipping end over end as it shot from the trolley...

Dominique still had her mouth open to recover her breath when the chunk of glass hit her right in it.

It sliced apart the muscle of her tongue and carved right through the soft flesh at the back of her throat, ripping into tissue and arteries like a miniature chainsaw before stopping abruptly against the bones of her neck. Shattering into a dozen pieces, the glass burst outwards from the point of impact, committing further internal

carnage before coming to a stop deep inside her, tangled in shredded tissue.

Dominique's head had been jerked backwards by the impact; now, it slowly tipped forwards again as she feebly raised her hands to her mouth. She tried to speak, but all that emerged was a wet gurgling sound. Blood started to drip, then flow from her lips, pumped from great lacerations inside her neck by her still-racing heart.

Amy gasped in horror as she saw what had happened.

Something solid slid from Dominique's mouth as the blood continued to pour out. A torn, severed chunk of her tongue. It landed in her lap, splashing the blood already pooling there over the other diners. With a final tiny sound of anguish, Dominique stared desperately at Jack as she slowly slumped forward, then toppled off the chair, her head hitting the marble floor with a crack.

Not that she felt it. She was already dead before the first scream echoed through the room, the soothing sound of classical violins quickly replaced by confused panic.

ELEVEN

"You know, Curtis, this is starting to get to be a habit," said Beriev.

"Shut up, Pete," Amy warned him. They were still in L'Opera, where part of a paramedic team was zipping Dominique's corpse into a body bag as the rest of their number treated the people who'd been cut by pieces of flying glass from the exploding bottle. Cops had shown up at the same time as the paramedics, responding to calls by frightened patrons that there had been some sort of explosion.

"I'm serious," Beriev told her curtly. "He's present at four deaths in as many days? That takes it way past coincidence as far as I'm concerned. If it was up to me I'd arrest him right now."

"But it's not up to you, is it?" said Jack from the chair where he was sitting, staring morosely at the floor. He was tired. Tired physically, tired emotionally and tired of Beriev treating him like shit. He wearily raised his head to look up at the policeman. "How many witnesses this time? Ten, twelve? They all say the same thing—I didn't kill her. I didn't kill Donahue or Chelsea Cox, either."

"You did kill that guy in the alley, though," Beriev reminded him, eyes glinting coldly.

"In self-defense," Amy snapped. "And to save *my* life as well, remember? Which he wouldn't have had to do if you hadn't taken so long getting your God-damn coffee!"

Anger flared on Beriev's face. "Hey! Don't you even think about trying to pin this on me, Amy. What the hell's wrong with you? Ever since you met this guy, you've been defending him and turning your back on everyone else!"

"I *haven't* been turning my back," Amy said. "It's just that... This is something more than just police work, Pete. I can't really explain it, but it matters. It's important."

"Well, you might *have* to explain it. And this premonition bullshit isn't going to cut it with Internal Affairs, Amy. Word's been going around. You know what cops are like—people at the precinct have been talking about you."

"Oh, yeah? And what have they been saying?"

"You don't want to know. But everybody's worried about you. You're getting too tied up in whatever the hell this guy's up to."

"I'm not 'up to' anything," Jack said. "I've just been trying to save people's lives. Same as you."

"Yeah, well, you've been doing a bang-up job, that's for sure." Beriev jerked a thumb at the black rubber bag containing Dominique as the paramedics hoisted it onto a gurney and wheeled it away.

"And what about them?" demanded Amy, indicating Katie and Joshua, who were still giving their witness statements to other cops. "They'd be dead too if it wasn't for Jack."

"So *you* say," Beriev said, clearly not believing her. "But how did he know who they were and where to find them, even if he actually did somehow save them? That journal you found in the warehouse doesn't name any names, Amy. It's pretty God-damn vague. But somehow this guy has it all worked out? Visions, premonitions, whatever—I don't believe in any of that kind of witchcraft crap, and you didn't used to either." He shook his head. "Wherever this guy goes, bad shit happens to people. You should stay away from him, Amy. Before you get hurt yourself. And more to the point, to save your career."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"I'm just warning you, is all. Cops talk. And some of them talk to their bosses. You run into a homeless guy who's got some crazy-ass story about having visions of people dying, and the next thing anyone knows he's hauling you around between crime scenes and living in your apartment. People are asking what the hell's going on."

Amy fixed Beriev with a cutting stare as she understood the implication of what he'd just said. "And how would anyone know that Jack's staying at my place, *Pete*?"

"I, uh..." He chewed on his lower lip, trapped.

"You son of a bitch." Amy stepped right up to Beriev, glaring up at his reddening face with a look of cold fury. "You *told* people? You went and told people at the precinct that Jack was staying at my apartment? What else did you tell them, Pete? That I was sleeping with him, maybe? What's the matter, jealous?"

Beriev struggled to find words. "It—it wasn't like that, Amy! Look, all I was doing was trying to protect you, okay? Keep you out of trouble!"

"I don't *need* your protection!" Amy said, forcing herself not to shout right into his face. "And it's none of your fucking business who I invite into my home!"

"You're my partner! That makes it my business!"

"Well, maybe it's time that I found a new partner," Amy growled, stepping back.

"What?" Beriev looked horrified.

"I can't believe you did this to me, Pete. You totally betrayed my confidence—my trust! How am I supposed to keep working with you after you do something like this to me? Jesus!"

"I didn't betray your trust, Amy!" protested Beriev. "I'm looking out for you, trying to help you! If you let this guy stick around with you, then sooner or later something bad's going to happen to you. And I'm not going to let that happen."

"It's not your decision to make, Pete," Amy told him coldly. "Now, excuse me. I want to go home."

Beriev narrowed his eyes, regarding Jack malevolently. "With *him*?"

"Yes, Pete, with *him*. Jack, come on, let's go." She held out a hand; Jack took it, standing up and following her in the direction of Joshua and Katie.

"Amy!" Beriev barked from behind them. "*Amy!*"

She ignored him, going to Katie. "Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm all right. I think." She was still pale, and her voice trembled slightly as she looked in the direction the paramedics had taken Dominique's body. It struck Amy that it was entirely possible Katie had never seen a dead body before—and certainly never witnessed somebody being killed in front of her. "Just a bit shaken up."

"You sure?"

Katie managed a small smile. "I'll be fine. Is everyone else okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine," said Joshua, joining them. His eyes flicked back and forth, as if scanning the restaurant for potential signs of danger. "I'm

just great. Nothing like finding out you're on death's list to make your day, huh?"

"But we reached the end of the list," Amy told him. "Jack? We have, haven't we?"

He pursed his lips. "I'm not sure..."

"We *must* have," Amy insisted. "Five senses, five people, right? That means it's over."

Katie looked questioningly at him. "Jack? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he said. "I still think there's something else, something I missed." The vague memory of a distorted face, of something gray and wet at the center of the pentagram—a body part? A *brain*?—flickered through his mind. "I don't *know*!" he repeated. Amy rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Jack, it's okay," she said. "You don't need to worry about it any more. We beat it." Her expression unexpectedly brightened. "Huh. We beat it!"

"Hell, glad I'm not the only person who's pleased about that," Joshua remarked. "So now what do we do?"

"I know that I want to go home," said Katie firmly. "You should too, Jack. I'd still like you to appear on my show tomorrow. If you feel that you're up to it, of course...?"

Jack considered it. "Yeah," he said at last. "Yes, I will." He'd made a promise to her, and whatever else happened, he was determined to fulfil his promises. "Ten thirty, you said?"

"Yes. I'll make sure that my people know you're coming and have everything set up for you. But I'd like to see you before we start taping anyway, go through what we're going to talk about."

"I'll make sure he's awake in time," Amy assured her. Joshua raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. "Jack, shall we go?"

"Where?" he asked, still distracted by the disturbing memory of his vision.

"Duh! Home!"

"I don't have..." he began, before registering her expression. "Oh. Gotcha."

Leaving Katie to answer Joshua's questions about when and where the edition of her show featuring Jack would be airing, Amy led Jack

out of the restaurant. Beriev was still lurking on the periphery of the uniformed officers talking to the other patrons, and gave them both a nasty look as they headed for the exit. Amy ignored him; Jack stared back defiantly.

Outside, they found a handful of other cops holding back a curious crowd. Among the people was a minicam news crew; Jack was taken aback when he saw that the cameraman was the same guy who had filmed Chelsea Cox's death, Brad somebody. He heard his name mentioned in a loud whisper, then the reporter, a man with plastic-looking hair and a slightly vacant expression, hustled past the cops and thrust a microphone at him.

"Mr Curtis! Vaughn Henderson, WNYK news. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Taken by surprise, Jack stopped. "Uh... I guess..."

Henderson glanced at Brad, giving him some kind of signal, then turned back to face Jack—standing, Jack noticed, so that his own face would appear in profile on camera. "Jack Curtis, you've been present at the deaths of three celebrities in the past three days—Chelsea Cox, Dawson Donahue and now Dominique Swann. Can you tell us how you managed to be on the scene for all these tragic occurrences?"

"Sorry, but he can't," Amy cut in quickly, placing herself between Jack and the camera. "Jack, come on, let's get out of here."

She tried to maneuver him back behind the cops, but Henderson, undeterred, squeezed after them. "Mr Curtis! Is it true that you've had psychic premonitions about these deaths?"

"How the hell..." Jack started, before clamping his mouth shut as he remembered that he was still being taped. Amy said something to one of the cops, who nodded and moved to block the camera's view.

"There's a cab," she told him, pointing into the street and waving frantically at it. The battered yellow Caprice squelched to a standstill in a bank of dirty snow at the side of the street, Jack gratefully climbing into the back seat. Amy followed him, telling the driver her address.

"How the hell did they find out about the... you know?" he asked, looking away as Brad tried to get one last shot of him driving off.

Amy glared back at the restaurant, seeing Beriev emerge. "I can guess," she snapped. Cops and their damn gossip! She doubted Beriev would have been the one talking to the press, but she now knew that he'd discussed her current situation with other cops, and it only took one loudmouth in the precinct to drop a hint to some "pal" in the journalistic profession—for the price of a couple of drinks, of course—to let the word out that there was something of potential interest going on. "Well, that's me screwed."

"What do you mean?"

"If the news people know about you and your premonitions, then that means Internal Affairs are going to know about it as well. So I'm going to have to answer questions about it, no matter what. And Pete was right. They're not going to accept that as an answer. The NYPD doesn't recognize the existence of the paranormal. Not last time I checked, anyway." She caught sight of the driver looking quizzically back over his shoulder at her. "Yeah, eyes on the road, pal."

"So what are you going to do?" Jack asked.

"I don't know. I'll have to figure that out when it happens, I guess."

She let out a deep sigh and sank back into the taxi's sagging seat, huddling into her coat. Jack wanted to say something to boost her confidence, but nothing was forthcoming. The knowledge that the press now knew about his visions had rattled him, more than he would have expected. Did that mean he was going to be regarded as some kind of freak, a joke to be mocked and disregarded?

And there was something else still weighing heavily on his mind, as well. Try as he might, he couldn't free himself from the last image of Dominique Swann staring desperately at him as the life drained out of her, blood oozing from her mouth as she silently begged for help that nobody could give her.

He slumped back as well, next to Amy. They drove through the cold streets of the city in silence.

Amy didn't get any more talkative when they returned to her apartment, almost immediately heading out into the night again to

get both of them something to eat. She returned almost twenty minutes later bearing a pizza, which they worked their way through almost wordlessly, Amy flicking through the TV channels until she eventually found a news report on the death of Dominique.

It was the same reporter, Henderson, who'd caught Jack at the restaurant delivering the story, starting with a potted history of Dominique's life and career before going into the more sensational aspects of her death. A woman whom Jack belatedly realized was one of Dominique's friends—"friends," rather, since she was now taking full advantage of the situation to get her moment on camera—described events with a certain degree of drunken exaggeration, before both Joshua and Katie were caught on camera leaving the restaurant. Katie still looked shaken and told Henderson she had nothing to say before leaving, but Joshua, having donned a pair of expensive sunglasses, dropped back into the role of the Masta to offer a few words of condolences. He was cut off mid-sentence, Jack guessing because his next word was almost certainly "motherfucker." Amy let out a little grunt of disapproval.

Although he'd half-expected it, the next shot still sent a cold charge through Jack. It was *him* on the screen, looking round in surprise at the camera as Henderson called his name. Amy quickly interposed herself, but the reporter provided a voice-over rather than use the recorded questions: "This man, Jack Curtis, has been present when three young celebrities have died in mysterious circumstances in the past three days: garbage magnate Dawson Donahue, sensual chef Dominique Swann, and WNYK's own award-winning reporter Chelsea Cox." Pictures of each victim flashed up. "He claims to have had a psychic vision of the deaths—were Katie Astin and Masta Thugg also in his premonition? The police may want a peek into his crystal ball. Vaughn Henderson, WNYK News."

"Huh," said Jack, dismayed. He stood, turning his back on the TV and slowly wandering around the room until he came face to face with one of Amy's larger sculptures. The dead eyes of the tall bird stared back at him from above its long pointed beak. "Well, that's going to complicate things."

"You're not kidding," Amy said, in a small voice. Jack looked round at her. She'd curled into a ball on the couch, arms wrapped tightly around her legs.

"Amy? What's the matter?"

She stayed silent and still for some seconds, before lifting the remote and switching off the TV. "I think," she eventually said, "I just saw the end of my police career."

Jack moved back to the couch and sat next to her. "What do you mean?"

She waved a disconsolate hand at the TV. "I mean, that now everybody in the damn *city* knows about you, and your vision, and me. Pete was right. The department is going to want to know what the hell's going on, and whether I've been keeping anything from them."

"But you said yourself, the NYPD doesn't believe in the paranormal," said Jack. "They can't use something against you if they don't accept that it exists."

"They might not believe in the paranormal, but they don't believe in people who *do* believe in it either," Amy told him miserably. "I'm screwed."

Hesitantly, Jack lifted a hand and rested it on her shoulder. "Amy. You're not screwed. Just blame everything on me."

She tipped her head to look round at him. "What?"

"I'll take the blame. You don't have to admit to believing in anything at all. You're a cop, right?"

"Maybe not for long," she cut in.

Jack shook his head. "No, that's not going to happen. You're a cop, you were investigating a lead, and it panned out. That's all that matters, surely? If they want to know how you got the lead in the first place, just blame it on me, like I said. I've got nothing to lose."

"I don't think that it's going to be that easy," said Amy. "And you *do* have something to lose now, remember? Because of all this, you've turned your life around. You're not some penniless, homeless guy any more."

"I don't have a home," Jack pointed out.

Now, it was Amy's turn to wrap an arm around *his* shoulders. "Yeah," she said, looking into his eyes, "you do."

It took a moment for the full meaning of her words to sink in. "Really?" he asked, almost unwilling to believe it.

"Yeah."

"Oh."

She nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"I... I don't know what to say."

"'Thanks' would be nice," Amy said with a half-smile.

"It seems a bit... inadequate. Considering everything that you've done for me already, I mean."

"Jack, you saved my life! I owe you *everything*."

He felt somewhat uncomfortable. "You don't have to take me in because of that, Amy..."

"You say it like I'm adopting a stray kitten or something! Jack, I'm not just making the offer because of what you did for me. There are other reasons, as well."

"But you hardly know me..."

"I know you well enough to know that I want to get to know you more." Amy smiled at him again, and this time Jack couldn't help but respond in kind. "Just because you've been through some bad times doesn't stop you from being a good person. You've proved that with what you've done. And because of you, two other people who would have been dead are still alive as well." She watched as the smile on his face faded. "Jack? What is it?"

He sighed. "It's just... Three people are alive who wouldn't be if it wasn't for me—for us. But there were three other people who aren't. I should have been able to do more to save them."

"Jack, you did everything you possibly could to try to save them!" Amy protested. "You can't blame yourself for their deaths!"

"It's hard not to when..." Dominique's anguished face appeared in shocking clarity when he closed his eyes, her last despairing look of pain directed right at him. "If I'd just been a bit faster, then maybe I could have..."

"Jack." Amy's voice was now firm, authoritative. "You did everything you possibly could to save them. Hell, you did way more

than most people would have done! *You saved the lives of three people.*" She pulled him closer, fixing her eyes on his. "That's what you should be thinking about. You beat that psycho, you beat death's list!" She gestured at the window, where light from the moon was casting a pale light over the snowy street outside. "Artemis can look down with her eye all she wants, but she's not going to see anything. It's over, and I'm still alive, Katie and Joshua are still alive... and so are you. You've done it."

"But what about the sixth victim?" Jack wondered. "There's still somebody else, I'm sure of it, and I don't even know who."

"'The sixth shall be revealed through the taking of the five,' yeah, I remember," said Amy. "But the five *haven't* been taken! And you said that you couldn't see who the sixth victim was when you had your vision. So maybe that means that there isn't going to *be* a sixth victim any more. You saved him as well, or her, without even having to find them."

"I don't know..."

Amy reached up and gently placed a finger over his mouth. Jack stopped talking, surprised. "I do," she said. "We're all safe. Thanks to you, Jack." She moved her finger away, then leaned over to kiss him on the lips.

He returned the kiss, the two of them pressing closer together as their mouths joined, each feeling the warmth of the other's lips and tongue. Amy was the first to pull away; Jack looked at her in momentary disappointment before registering her suggestive expression. "Are you coming?" she asked.

He knew exactly what she meant, but decided to tease her for a moment. "Coming where?"

She smiled. "You don't have to sleep on my couch tonight, Jack..."

He awoke with a start, confused for a few seconds. Confused by the comfort of a proper bed, the warmth of a naked body next to his...

Amy's hand slipped over his stomach, around his side. "Hi."

"Hi."

"I was wondering when you'd wake up."

Jack shifted position so that he could look at her in the low morning light of her bedroom. She was lying on her side smiling down at him, head supported by her other hand. "What time is it?"

"Just after eight."

"Later than I normally get up. This is one hell of a comfortable bed."

Amy suppressed a snort of laughter, still grinning. "You think you could get used to it, then?"

"It, ah..." He reached out to slip an arm beneath her body. The simple sensation of feeling the heat of another's bare skin against his own was something he hadn't experienced for years, and had honestly thought he never would again. It gave him a thrill of sheer delight to realize that he'd been wrong. "It's got everything in it that I could want," he said as he pushed himself up on one elbow to kiss her. Somewhere in the back of his mind a tiny voice protested that he was being unfaithful to Jennifer.

Jennifer had kicked *him* out, though. The hell with her. He had Amy now. When he'd been with Jennifer, his life had been doing downhill all the way. Now, he was on the way back up.

As if to confirm that, Amy reminded him, "You need to get up and get ready to go and meet Katie."

"I've still got a couple of hours yet," Jack half-complained, nuzzling up against Amy's cheek.

"Nuh-uh. You need to get some more new clothes."

"What? What's wrong with the ones I've got now?"

She smiled and kissed him. "Trust me. You're going on TV, you need to look your best. You want to make a good impression on Katie, don't you?"

"What, you think she's got a thing for me?"

She hooked an arm around his neck and pulled him closer. "I saw you first." Another kiss. "But seriously, I'll come with you, tell you what looks best on you."

"You think I can't tell on my own?"

"You should always do what the cops tell you," Amy said jokingly, kneeling up and straddling Jack.

"Especially when they're hot Asian policewomen?"

"You're a fast learner." She lowered her head to kiss him again. "So you just lie there, and—oh, *man!*" The phone by the bed started to ring.

"Just ignore it," Jack offered hopefully, but he could already tell that Amy's mood had changed.

"It might be important." She clambered off him, moving to the side of the mattress. "Hold that thought," she said, glancing between his legs, then picked up the phone. "Hello?"

Even in the half-light of the bedroom, Jack could see Amy visibly slump, her voice becoming more terse and strained with each answer. Finally, she replaced the handset and turned back to him, face grim. "That was the precinct. They want me to come in for an interview. Internal Affairs wants to talk to me." She looked away from him, down at the bed, then suddenly beat the mattress with her fists. "Shit! Shit! *Shit!*"

"Amy..." said Jack, unsure what he could do to reassure her.

She stopped, taking a long breath and looking back at him, embarrassed. "Sorry, I'm sorry. Damn it! I knew this would happen, I just didn't think it was going to be so soon... Jack, I'm going to have to go. They want to see me before nine."

"That soon?"

"IA work according to the time in Hell, not Manhattan." Head bowed, Amy climbed from the bed and padded over to a closet, taking out clothes. "Guess I'm not going to be able to go with you today. I'm sorry..."

"I'll try not to buy anything too hideous," he assured her, trying to lighten the moment. She glanced back at him, the faintest hint of a smile briefly curling the corner of her mouth. "Will you be okay?"

"I'll... survive, I guess," she said, pulling on her underwear. "Though by the time IA's finished with me I might end up checking parking meters for a living. If I'm lucky." She look at Jack again, catching his glum expression. "Look, Jack, don't worry about me. I'll get through this, whatever they throw at me. You just go and be a TV star. I'll try to catch up with you at Katie's studio if I can get there in

time, otherwise we'll meet back here. There's a spare set of keys in the pot by the sink."

"Are you sure? If you want me to go with you, give my side of the story, I can call Katie and get her to reschedule..."

Amy shook her head. "No. I've got to handle this myself. I'm a cop, I've got to take the consequences of my own actions." She finished donning her clothes, shaking out her hair as she pulled on a black sweater. "I've got to go. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay," said Jack, watching as she hurried from the bedroom. "Good luck."

But the door had already closed behind her.

"What the hell happened to you?" Beriev asked, intercepting Amy as she entered the precinct.

"What do you mean?" She was in a bad enough mood as it was without Beriev adding to it.

"Your hair! It looks like you got dragged through a hedge."

"I didn't have time to shower. IA only called me less than half an hour ago, and it took me that long just to get here."

Beriev flicked a glance at his watch. "You been lying in while you've been on leave, or something? You're normally up by..." A tight, bitter look of suspicion appeared on his face. "Wait. You didn't..."

"I've got to go, Pete," Amy said, cutting off a question that she could already predict. "I'll maybe catch you later when I get out. *If* I get out." She started to walk away.

"Wait!" Beriev barked; an order, the same voice he would use on a suspect. A couple of the other uniformed cops in the precinct's entrance looked around to see what was going on. Amy stopped, refusing to look back at him. "Amy, you—you're not telling me that—with *him*?"

She slowly turned to face him, jaw clenched tight as anger and adrenaline boiled in her stomach. "Pete. I'm going to tell you this for the last time. It's none of your *fucking business*. Okay? I don't want

to hear *one more word* from you about Jack. Do I make myself clear?"

Beriev was practically shaking with rage, struggling to keep his voice under control. "Yeah, Amy. I get it."

"Good." She whipped around and strode away from him, heading for the stairs.

"He's gonna get you hurt, Amy!" Beriev shouted after her. "I'm not gonna let that happen!"

She didn't look back.

There were two detectives from Internal Affairs waiting for Amy upstairs in one of the interview rooms. Although she was entitled to have a representative with her, she'd already chosen not to. The quicker this was over, the better.

It seemed that the pair were going to be playing "good cop, bad cop." The larger of the two men, a bulky, jowly Hispanic called Rodriguez was aggressive almost from the moment Amy entered the room, while his companion, a tall, goateed guy named Turner, was more relaxed and conciliatory. Amy knew that was just an act, however. Both of the IA officers would be out for blood. It was their job.

"So then, Officer Tom," Turner began after introductions and opening statements about why the interview had been called were out of the way, "can you explain to us, in your own words, your actions following your release from hospital?"

Amy shot a glance at the tape recorder by Turner's hand, which he had just activated. "Is this an interview or an interrogation?"

"That depends on you," rumbled Rodriguez, who was leaning against a wall to one side, arms folded threateningly across his chest.

Turner took a sheet of paper from a folder. "You left the hospital, you returned to this precinct, and you spoke to the suspect, this, ah..." He peered more closely at the paper. "...Jack Curtis."

"He wasn't a suspect," Amy said, knowing full well that Turner knew Jack's name. His "forgetfulness" was all part of the act, to make

him seem less threatening.

"Until you confirmed otherwise when you gave your statement, he was still a suspect in your attack. Then later that morning, you encountered Curtis again, at the scene of Chelsea Cox's death. How?"

"By chance," Amy said. "Pete Beriev was driving me home. We got caught in traffic, and Jack was going that way."

"And after Ms Cox's death, you went to the morgue at St Vincent's. Why?"

"Because I wanted to find out who the guy was who'd tried to kill me."

"I see." Turner carefully replaced the paper in the folder, making a show of lining everything up neatly before looking back up at Amy with his owlish eyes. "Then afterwards, you went to the abandoned warehouse on the Hudson where you found the... lair, apparently, of your attacker."

"Yes."

Turner steepled his fingers. "Would you care to explain the reasoning that brought you to that location?"

"Dr Klugman showed me the dead man's possessions. He had a key—Jack recognised the logo on the fob."

"And if we went up to St Vincent's, would that piece of *evidence* still be there?" Rodriguez demanded.

Amy swallowed. "No."

"Curtis took it?"

"No. I did," she lied, to protect Jack.

"And you used it to gain illegal entry to the warehouse? With a civilian, thereby possibly contaminating a crime scene?"

"I had probable cause."

"You were off-duty," Turner pointed out. "In fact, you were on compulsory medical leave."

"So," Rodriguez continued, pushing himself off the wall and slowly pacing around behind Amy, "after that you finally did something *right* and called the department. But then, you breached protocol by using department resources to find the home address of a private individual—namely, Dawson Donahue—and right after you get there,

he gets blown up. By a leaking gas tank in a car that has your pal Curtis's fingerprints on it."

"We already went through this at Forest Hills," Amy snapped. "Everything checked out. It was an accident."

"Mm-hmm," said Turner, nodding almost absently. "But it wasn't an accident that you were both there, was it?"

"What do you mean?"

Rodriguez stepped into view from behind her, rapping his knuckles on the table with each name. "Chelsea Cox. Dawson Donahue. Dominique Swann. Three celebrity stiff. And you and Curtis were there when each of them died! And don't think we don't know about Katie Astin almost getting killed by a hot dog cart or that asshole rapper nearly being squashed by his own stereo, either. Common denominator? You and Curtis!"

"You seem to have a knack for being there just when these people are about to have a really bad day," Turner observed. "Want to tell us how?"

"See, if you don't," said Rodriguez, spotting Amy's hesitation, "we might start thinking that you and Curtis actually had something to do with it. That you're maybe even responsible somehow."

"We were trying to *save* them!" Amy protested. "And we did—Katie and Joshua would be dead if we hadn't helped them!"

"So how did you know they were in danger?" asked Turner. "Sure, you could interpret what the guy who attacked you wrote in his journal as describing the dead people after the fact, but there were no names, no specific clues. So if you and Curtis weren't actually involved in their deaths, how were you led to them?"

"See, I saw on the news last night that Curtis has *visions*," said Rodriguez, mockingly waggling his fingers on each side of his face to suggest spookiness. "That true? You getting help from a Ghostbuster?"

Amy realized she'd been trapped. Turner and Rodriguez had skilfully led the interview in a particular direction, one which left her only two choices: either reveal the truth about Jack's vision—which would cripple her career, as any cop who admitted placing faith in psychic premonitions would be left wide open to a courtroom attack

on their credibility by a defense attorney every time they were called upon to give evidence—or say nothing.

Which would also cripple her career, or even destroy it. Failure to co-operate with an Internal Affairs investigation would leave a huge black mark on her record, and possibly even result in her dismissal from the force.

She considered her options. The word about Jack's visions had already been revealed by the media, and she was sure that Beriev's gossip—the backstabbing bastard!—would have also reached the ears of Rodriguez and Turner by now, so she wouldn't be revealing anything that IA didn't already suspect. But if she admitted to believing in the premonitions of a homeless man, to the extent of risking her career over them, then she would never be considered a credible witness in court again, making her all but useless as a police officer. The evidence, the fact that Jack had been proven correct, would be ignored, dismissed as something fit only for the *Weekly World News* along with sightings of Bigfoot and Elvis.

More to the point, she knew, she would be betraying Jack.

"So what's it going to be, Tom?" asked Rodriguez.

Amy leaned back in the chair and fixed him with a firm gaze, ready to give him her answer.

"Amy?"

"Leave me alone, Pete," said Amy, voice choked as she hurried past him.

Beriev lumbered after her, the equipment on his belt jingling and rattling. "Amy! What happened?"

She stopped at the door of the precinct and whirled, almost hissing the words. "I'll *tell* you what happened, Pete! I've been put on indefinite unpaid suspension pending a full investigation for not co-operating with Internal Affairs. You know why? Because *you* went and opened your big fucking mouth about Jack!"

Beriev, taken aback, opened his mouth to speak but couldn't get any words out before Amy continued her attack. "What was it, Pete?"

Were you so *jealous* of him that you thought you had to destroy him, so that you could keep me for yourself?"

"No!" began Beriev, appalled. "That wasn't what..."

"Well, that's what's happened!" She pulled open the door, letting in a freezing draught. "Thanks a lot, Pete."

"Amy, I never meant to do anything to hurt you! You know that! I only wanted to do what was best for you!"

"You know what the best thing you can do for me right now is?" She shot him a disgusted look as she stepped through the door. "Stay the hell away from me."

She slammed the door shut, cutting off Beriev's dismayed reply, and walked away into the cold.

TWELVE

Despite being concerned about what was going to happen to Amy, Jack had eventually decided to take her advice and buy some more new clothes. A walk of a few blocks in the direction of Midtown had brought him to a suitable store; the dark blue suit he was now wearing might not exactly be Armani or Hugo Boss, but for an off-the-peg outfit it was presentable enough—and besides, he was still wary of spending more money than absolutely necessary. Always lurking at the back of his mind was the notion that anything he'd received could just as easily be taken away.

After buying the suit, and heading back to Amy's apartment so that he could quickly change before getting a cab to go and meet Katie, he'd spotted a tabloid paper at a news-stand where the front-page story had, somewhat predictably, been coverage of Dominique's death. Rather more surprisingly, his own picture was attached to the story. To his dismay, the shot the paper had used was from four years before, his mugshot following his arrest for vehicular homicide. If he'd recognized him, the news vendor had kept quiet about it—the Jack in the photo was rather fuller-faced than his present-day counterpart—but he'd certainly been taken aback when Jack had practically thrown the money at him and snatched the paper from the rack.

In the cab and heading downtown, he read the story, groaning when he saw his painful life of the past few years reduced to a handful of cold statements;—"former bus driver," "convicted," "homeless," "claimed to have a premonition of the deaths." Beyond that, everything else the paper had to say about him was pure speculation.

Somehow, when he arrived at Katie's building, the press had already found out that he was going to be there. The cab pulled up outside the coffee house, and hanging around outside the already repaired facade across the street was a minicam crew and a couple of bored-looking people in thick coats, their breath steaming in the morning cold.

Grimacing, Jack paid the cabbie and got out, almost immediately attracting the attention of the lurking journalists. He waited for the light on the crossing to change, but the minicam crew decided not to wait and scurried towards him through the fast-moving traffic, waving arms and shaking fists at any vehicles that got too close to them.

The reporter wasn't Vaughn Henderson, but he had the same kind of sharkish plastic appearance. "Mr Curtis!" he cried as he vaulted a dirty snowbank to reach the sidewalk. "Ed Brody, WHDG news. Can I have a few words?"

"Depends what they are," said Jack, suppressing the urge to offer two particular ones, the second being "off."

"Is it true that you had a vision of all those famous people dying?"

"Wrong words," Jack told him, shaking his head and turning away from the camera. The sign changed to "WALK." He was about to step into the street, before he halted mid-stride and looked down the road to make sure that the traffic had actually come to a stop. Just in case.

All the vehicles in sight were stationary in both directions. Relieved, he crossed the street, the minicam crew buzzing around him like oversized hornets. The cameraman switched on a small spotlight mounted on top of the camera, shining it annoyingly in Jack's face as he tried to get in front of him. He caught a glimpse of his own distorted reflection in the lens. "Did you save the life of Katie Astin?" Brody pressed on. "Is that why you're going to appear on her show today?"

"Watch it and find out," Jack growled, holding up a hand to shade himself from the spotlight. He ignored a couple more questions before reaching the far sidewalk, then headed for the building's doors, skirting the other people whom he suspected to be press as well. The news crew was still following him, so he shot them a curt, "Interview's over," before going inside. To his relief they didn't follow, the spotlight switching off.

Inside the lobby, Jack noticed what looked like a semi-permanent sign marked "Katie Astin Show," with an arrow pointing to a corridor leading to the back of the building past the reception desk. Katie had told him that she'd left his name with the receptionists, so he headed

for the desk. Before he could reach it, though, a woman's voice came from one side: "Mr Curtis?"

"Christ," Jack muttered to himself, before looking round to see who was talking. A young woman in an almost comically oversized winter coat and a pink woolly hat stood up from one of the bench seats at the side of the lobby and hurried over to him, one mittened hand outstretched. Despite himself, Jack softened slightly. Even though she was almost certainly another journalist, at least she was a cute one. "Hi. And you are?"

"Holly Jo Halliwell, New York Star."

Jack briefly shook her hand. "And what can I do for you, Holly Jo?"

"I'd like to get your life story."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

Holly Jo glanced down at the newspaper he was still carrying. "I guess you've seen what our rivals have said about you. Not too flattering, huh?"

"Yeah." There was a litter bin nearby; Jack moved to dump the paper in it.

"How would you like to set the record straight?"

He paused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, tell the story your way. Say what really happened, how you tried to save the lives of all those people."

"Sorry, but I'm not interested."

"But you're going to tell Katie Astin, though?"

"Just as a favor to her."

"Oh, in return for the money she gave you for saving her life yesterday."

"You got a point here?" Jack snapped irritably, flinging the newspaper into the bin and heading for the reception desk.

"Mr Curtis," said Holly Jo, any trace of youthful giddiness instantly gone from her voice. "I've been authorized by my editor-in-chief to offer you a substantial amount of money for your story."

Jack stopped again. "How substantial?"

"Well into five figures. At least."

That caught Jack's attention. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. We want to tell the world what's happened, in *your* words. Rather than just rely on speculation like your friends out there." She gestured in the direction of the doors; the minicam crew was still lurking outside, peering hopefully through the glass.

He considered it. Mid-five figures? That was a *lot* of money, even when he'd had a job. Now, it was almost beyond imagination, even more than what Katie had given him...

Katie. He still had an obligation to her. "I'm sorry," he said, almost reluctantly, "but... I promised Katie Astin that I'd go on her show. So she should really be the first person that I talk about this to. I'm sorry."

Holly Jo didn't seem too disappointed. "But would you be willing to talk to me *after* you've been on her show today?"

Mid-five figures... "Sure," he said, after a moment's consideration. "I guess."

Holly Jo stuck out her hand again, this time pulling off her mitten. Jack looked down at it uncertainly, then shook it. Holly Jo beamed. "Excellent," she said, reaching into a pocket of her padded coat. "Here's my card. Just give me a call after the show's finished filming, and I can come and meet you wherever it's convenient. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Great!" She flashed him another broad smile, then pulled her mitten back on as she walked to the doors. "See you later!"

It only struck Jack after he'd gone to the reception desk and been allowed into the building that Katie's show wasn't live. OIt wouldn't be broadcast for another couple of days. Holly Jo had cleverly got him to agree to what would probably be his first interview to appear in the media, even if it wouldn't be the first one he'd actually given. He couldn't help but smile at her cheek.

Oh well. If she were telling the truth, then the money—he decided that he'd want to pin down an exact figure from her and her bosses before he said a word—should make up for being hoodwinked. It wasn't as though it would hurt anyone. Katie was waiting for him in her office upstairs. "Jack!" she said, jumping up from her chair as an assistant showed him in.

"Hi, Katie. How are you feeling?"

She kissed him on the cheek and hugged him, leaving him feeling slightly self-conscious. "Ohh... I'm not sure. I'm still all shaken up after last night. That poor woman..." She released him and stepped back, looking sadly up at him. "Every time I closed my eyes I saw her. It was terrible."

"I know the feeling," Jack told her.

"I just have to keep telling myself that she's gone to a better place, that there was a reason for it. But I don't know if that's going to be much comfort to her family..." Katie shook her head. "But I'm glad you're here. Please, sit down." She directed him to a plush armchair in one corner of the room, the windows looking out onto downtown Manhattan. Jack lowered himself into the chair, Katie perching on the edge of a matching couch, facing him. "I want to go through what you want to talk about on the show."

"I don't know," said Jack. "It's your show, so I guess you get to choose the questions. I mean, I don't even know what to expect."

"I'm guessing you've never been on TV before?" Jack shook his head. "Or seen my show?"

"Afraid not. Not this one, anyway. I saw your sitcom, though."

She smiled. "That was... quite a while ago. Another me. But that's okay. Somebody once described my show as a 'spiritual Oprah.' They didn't mean it in a complimentary way, but I was quite happy with it! Anyway, I don't ask people questions that they don't want to answer—it's not about being confrontational. I want to help people, that's why I chose to do this. I realized that I was becoming..." Her voice dropped, and her gaze flicked away from Jack for a brief moment. "...selfish and self-destructive. But I found a way out." She looked back at him, eyes bright. "And I want to share that with other people."

"That's great," said Jack, a little taken aback by her enthusiastic sincerity. He didn't need to ask what her way out had been—her billboard had made that clear enough—and wasn't sure how he'd react if Katie tried to convert him during the show. "So what do you want to talk about?"

"I want to talk about *you*, Jack!" she said. "You're living proof that not everyone in this city is selfish and nasty and heartless. You did

everything you could to save the lives of people you didn't even know, and didn't ask for anything in return. You had nothing, but you still risked everything to help others. I'd like you tell everyone why you did it. Who knows? Maybe it'll inspire other people to do the same."

"It'd be nice if they did," Jack sighed.

Katie raised an eyebrow. "You sounded a little cynical there, Jack..."

"Yeah, I kind of have a bit of a bleak view of people. Comes with the territory."

"But you're not in that territory any more. And you might be able to help other people out of it as well." Katie sat back on the couch.

"Do you want a coffee or something?"

"Yeah, please."

Katie reached over to issue a request for two cups through an intercom on her nearby desk, then turned back to Jack. "So, you never did tell me exactly *how* you found out that I was in danger. What was it that brought you to me in the first place?"

Jack shifted uncomfortably, aware that the truth might make him seem like a joke—or worse, a lunatic. "I had a... a vision," he said at last.

Katie looked surprised, but also intrigued. "What kind of vision?"

He frowned, not entirely willing to allow the images back into his mind. "It was just flashes, glimpses of people in pain, dying... But I couldn't make any sense of them until I saw the signs."

Now Katie seemed positively excited. "Signs?"

"Yeah. I was going down a street and I saw you, and Joshua, and all the others—you know, on TV, or in stores. You were on a billboard. And then I kept seeing other things, little... I dunno, little hints that something was about to happen. Once I knew they were there, I was able to try to do something to stop it. Not fast enough for Dominique and the others, though."

Katie's expression saddened briefly, before her excitement returned. "Do you know what this means, Jack?"

"What?"

"There's only one person who could have sent you those signs. God himself! You must have a... a sixth sense, something that let you see warnings from the Lord!"

"I'm not sure I'd describe it exactly like that..."

"I would," Katie said firmly. "It might even be an actual miracle! Jack, you've been blessed! This is amazing. If you can see the signs, then who knows how many other people you might be able to help?" She leaned forward again, watching him keenly, almost expectantly. "Please, tell me about these signs..."

Amy was surprised to find herself back where it all began: on the street opposite the alley where she'd been attacked.

After leaving the precinct, she'd wandered almost in a daze, not really aware of anything but her own feelings of anger and failure. She'd helped save two people's lives, but in doing so it looked as though she'd lost her own career. A small and selfish part of her mind demanded to know if that were a worthwhile trade.

It was, she told herself, shouting the inner voice down. Two people were alive who should have been dead because of the help she'd given Jack.

Yeah, sneered the voice, but nobody's given you ten grand in return for saving them, have they?

She shook her head in disgust at herself and fully took in her surroundings. Quite how she'd ended up here she had no idea. She checked her watch. It had been well over an hour and a half since her interview with Turner and Rodriguez had come to its bitter conclusion. Jesus. She'd been completely on auto-pilot, roaming without conscious thought.

Was there even still time to get to Katie's studio to see Jack on TV? She wasn't sure. With rush hour gone, the street was quiet; she looked for a cab, but there were none in sight. Annoyed, she turned and headed back the way she'd come.

As she walked, she realized that she was retracing the route she'd taken with Jack, when he'd shown her the signs that had led to him

identifying the psycho's other potential victims. There was the shop with the TVs in the window, now flickering through news report images of Dominique, Jack and, disconcertingly, herself; there a snow-smeared pile of spilled garbage in the gutter. Then, at the intersection, the billboard advertising Katie's show, her arms spread wide as she exhorted Amy to see the light.

She would have had more chance of getting a cab by heading north or south along the avenue, but for some reason she didn't quite understand, Amy instead continued eastwards. Crossing the road, for a moment she heard a low thud of hip-hop bass coming from a skinny white kid's iPod headphones as he passed in the opposite direction, then further down the block she reached the bookshop, its window display of copies of *Sensual Kitchen* now bearing a hurriedly hand-scrawled sign marked "Signed copies! Limited stock!" with "RIP Dominique" in rather smaller lettering beneath.

Signs...

She kept walking until she reached the adult bookstore, the place where Jack said he'd had his vision of the victims, of death.

Jack had told her he hadn't seen anything here to suggest who the sixth victim might be. But Amy had an odd, nagging feeling that he'd missed something. That she had, as well; she'd visited the spot before and noticed nothing.

Mirrored foil in the windows to protect underage or prudish passers-by from what was on sale inside, the reflective surface cracked and bubbled by age, distorting and stretching the image of her face within it...

Until that moment Amy hadn't been cold, her turbulent emotions distracting her from the winter weather, but suddenly she felt a horrific chill that pierced every cell of her body. She knew who the sixth victim was.

And the sixth shall be revealed through the taking of the five...

The sixth victim was Jack.

Even if the psycho hadn't been killed, it wouldn't have mattered: Jack's vision had already taken place. Maybe if death's plan had gone as intended, Jack would still have attempted to act upon it, trying to save the killer's targets, and come to the media's attention as a result.

As a man who possessed a *sixth sense*, an uncanny, inexplicable ability to glimpse the future, the final ingredient needed to cleanse the city...

Eyes fixed on the image of herself in the shop's window, Amy dropped to a crouch, looking closer. If Jack had fallen to the sidewalk when he had his vision, the first thing he would have seen when he opened his eyes would have been an elongated, fractured reflection of his own face in the peeling foil, barely recognizable yet instinctively familiar.

Which meant...

Amy jumped to her feet, gasping as the intuition hit her.

It wasn't over! There was one more name on death's list; Jack himself. Which meant he was in danger right now...

Christ! He might be dead already!

She instinctively reached into her jacket for her cellphone, before remembering that it had died with Dawson Donahue. She didn't even know the number of Jack's new phone, anyway; she'd never thought to get it from him.

And she didn't have a number for Katie to hand either. Not that it mattered; if she was in the middle of taping a show, then she wasn't going to stop to take a phone call.

Amy looked around frantically for a cab. None in sight.

She turned and broke into a clumsy sprint over the snow and slush on the sidewalk, racing back towards the intersection.

The studio in which Katie's show was taped was in the building's basement, a large room with an entrance on the first floor behind reception, steep steps leading down past ranks of seats like a movie theatre to the open floor. It seemed to be an integral part of the building's design; Jack guessed that New York's busy film and television industry made such mini-studios a viable proposition. He wondered idly if Katie's show were the only one that used it, or if there were other clients elsewhere in the building.

Katie had gone into a room at the back of the studio, behind the set, to have her make-up done. Jack's own make-up had been done in an adjoining support room, after which he'd been asked to wait in the "green room," which was actually more like a plywood-walled cabin against one wall. Feeling self-conscious and greasy with his face covered in powder, he sat around for quarter of an hour, idly flicking through the couple of magazines in the room and sipping coffee before getting bored and deciding to explore the studio.

It was far less glamorous than he'd imagined. The semi-circular set, which from the front looked as glitzy as every other TV talk show host's, turned out to be nothing more than wooden flats supported by raw lumber crudely nailed together, and the whole studio was filled with the smell of fresh sawdust and new paint. There was also a definite division between those people who'd come down from Katie's offices with her and the actual studio staff, the former seeming tightly wound and over-caffeinated, the latter having the air of nonchalant professional boredom that came with a union-protected job. Even though the studio was quite chilly, T-shirts were the order of the day.

Some of the technicians had ducked under the partly-open steel roller door that led to a loading ramp at the studio's rear so they could smoke, while others were congregated around a trestle table squeezed between the green room and a huge electrical panel under the ladder to the lighting gantry. Dozens of fat cables led from it onto the set, both across the floor and up to the ceiling like plastic-sheathed vines. Jack wandered over to the table. It turned out to be "craft services"—in other words, food and drink.

"Is it okay if I...?" Jack asked, pointing at some sandwiches.

An overweight guy in a baseball cap and a jangling toolbelt looked at him. "You the guy that saved the boss's life?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Then sure, help yourself!" The guy grinned and stepped aside. The other people bustled around him, offering thanks as much for saving their jobs as saving Katie, it seemed, and asking questions. Jack felt briefly uncomfortable with the attention, but went along with all the hand-shaking and shoulder-slapping. It was something

he was probably going to have to get used to after today; for a while, at least.

A voice crackled over the PA. Jack couldn't make out the muffled words, but it was obviously a call to arms for the studio staff, who dumped any unfinished food back onto the table before heading for their posts. He glanced past the side of the set to see people beginning to file down the steps to fill the banks of seats.

Katie still hadn't emerged from her make-up room, so he munched on a sandwich and picked up a can of cola, fingering the pull-tab as the set lights overhead burst into life at full brightness. He looked up, almost having to squint at the glare from the huge lamps. Even after only a few seconds, he could already feel the heat rising. That explained the T-shirts. He fingered his collar, wondering if he would get too hot in his suit.

Absently, he pulled the can's tab, only to feel a sharp pain in his finger as metal jabbed into his skin. There was a faint hiss of escaping gas from the can, but the top remained almost fully closed; the tab had snapped off. "Shit!" he hissed under his breath, hurriedly dumping the can back on the table and sucking his fingertip.

"*Please* don't say that on air." Jack looked round to see Katie smiling at him. With all her TV makeup on she now looked more like his mental picture of a television preacher—somewhat orange—but he knew that he wasn't much better off.

"I'll try to watch my language," he assured her.

"Are you okay?"

"Just cut my finger. Nothing fatal." He glared at the offending can, before turning his gaze back to the lights. "I didn't realise it was going to get so hot."

"They'll leave the stage door open to get some air in," Katie told him. "You'll survive, don't worry. You should see what it's like in the middle of summer!"

Jack winced. "I think I'll pass. How long before the show starts?"

"Once everybody's in their seats, about ten minutes. Are you ready?"

"To see the light and feel the love?" Jack grinned. "Lights, camera, action."

Amy clenched her fists in frustration. The cab ride south had been a stop-start affair, every single set of traffic lights conspiring to be against her as if someone had deliberately arranged it. Now the cab was halted at yet another set of lights, her view ahead completely obscured by the backs of three buses lined up like a mobile roadblock.

She checked her watch. It had been over twenty minutes since she'd jumped into the cab—finding one that hadn't been already occupied or off-duty had been a lengthy task in itself—and she wasn't even halfway there.

The traffic ground forward a few yards, then stopped again, the lumbering buses unleashing billowing clouds of filthy diesel soot from their exhausts. Amy had to struggle not to let out a growl.

For God's sake, move!

"...so I'd like to introduce you all to the man who saved my life, the man who proved that no matter what the cynics may claim, there are still people in this country willing to put the lives of others ahead of their own. So please, give a big welcome to a man of great personal courage... Jack Curtis!"

Jack was waiting just behind the set, ready to descend a small flight of steps and walk over to Katie. He was hot under the intense lights, and the thick make-up on his face felt as though it was there as much to block his pores and stop him from sweating as it was to make him look a normal color on camera.

God, he was thirsty. He should have picked up another can when he had the chance.

At least Katie had been right about one thing. With the soundstage doors open, occasional puffs of cold air were reaching him. But once he got onto the set, even that small relief would be gone.

Well, he was just going to have to take it. Compared to what he'd been through in the past days, to say nothing of the grim years

preceding them, enduring an hour or so of minor discomfort should be easy.

The roar of applause took him by surprise as he emerged from backstage. Blinking, dazzled, he descended the steps and approached Katie. She shook his hand, then changed her mind and pulled him into an embrace, which drew a few whoops from the audience.

Releasing him, Katie gestured to a low couch, inviting Jack to sit down on it before she sat on a matching chair. He looked at the still-applauding audience. There were at least a couple of hundred people watching him.

No sign of Amy, though. Her meeting must have gone on for a long time. Her absence sent an odd pang of disappointment through him.

"Uh, thanks, Katie, thank you," Jack said, a little overwhelmed. Katie had gone through what they were to talk about earlier, but he was still nervous and not quite sure what to expect.

She waited until the applause died down before speaking to him again. "So, Jack, I'm so glad that you're here—and I'm glad that I am too, thanks to you!" That drew laughter and another smattering of applause from the audience. Jack chuckled nervously. Katie gave him a reassuring smile, then became more serious, sympathetic. "But I know that the last few years have been very hard for you. So, can you please tell everyone how you came to be in this situation, and how you and I were brought together?"

Still eight blocks to go, and the traffic was solid. This far downtown, the streets were no longer arranged in the usual Manhattan grid pattern, and Amy had no way of seeing whether the blockage was limited to this junction, or if it extended all the way to Katie's studio building.

She looked out of the window at the sidewalk. There was a newsstand a short distance away, one the papers on display having a picture of Dominique on the front cover, as well as a smaller one of Jack.

Jack...

It could have just been a shadow caused by a cloud, by somebody walking past the news-stand... but just for an instant, a dark shape seemed to fall over Jack's picture, obscuring it.

Just for an instant. But it was enough to turn Amy's frustration into fear.

She made a decision.

"Keep the change!" she cried, stuffing two twenties through the slot in the plexiglas between her and the surprised driver, then jumping from the cab and sprinting away down the street.

"So tell me, Jack," said Katie, leaning forward in her seat with the same wide-eyed, expectant look she'd had in her office, "your vision... do you think it was sent to you by God?"

Jack hesitated briefly before answering. He didn't want to say anything he didn't really believe; on the other hand, he still felt somehow obligated to Katie for her financial help... and also, the audience was fully on his side. He'd expected them to react negatively to learning that he'd been homeless, but the way Katie had presented him, they now thought that he was on an almost Biblical path to redemption.

What the hell. It couldn't hurt.

"I definitely think I was sent the vision for a reason," he said, "so that I could help save you, and Joshua Cornell, and Amy." He lowered his voice. "I just wish that I'd been able to help the other people I saw in it as well."

That produced an audible collective sigh of condolences from the audience. It was certainly a better response than he'd ever got from the likes of Beriev. He looked up at the faces watching him, his discomfort under the hot studio lights forgotten.

Backstage, the main door was still open, letting cold air from the loading dock outside into the rapidly warming studio.

A stronger than usual gust found its way inside, rustling papers and stirring up litter and sawdust as the chill draught reached the abandoned craft services table. An almost empty styrofoam cup balanced on top of an untidy stack of paper plates and half-eaten sandwiches wobbled in the breeze, then toppled over. Although it barely weighed anything, the movement was enough to unbalance the top of the pile, a couple of plates sliding off it towards the side of the table.

They landed against Jack's can of cola with just enough force to nudge it sideways, the edge of its base slipping over the edge of the table. It wasn't quite far enough over to reach its tipping point...

Until the drink within slopped about with a faint glooping sound, almost as if someone had tapped the side of the can.

It fell the couple of feet to the hard concrete floor of the studio, landing with a flat clunk. The carbonated liquid instantly reacted to the impact by frothing up. Jack had pierced the top just a tiny amount when the tab broke; now, a thin, high-pressure brown spray jetted out sideways from the little hole.

The can rolled away from the craft services table, picking up speed as it left a trail of fizzing cola in its wake. It came to an abrupt stop against the studio's side wall.

Directly beneath the electrical panel.

Dark, sticky liquid continued to spray from the can, fountaining up the wall and onto the panel. Most of it simply dripped back down onto the floor.

But a trickle found its way into one of the heavy-duty electrical plugs.

With an angry snap, sparks flew from the plug as the liquid formed a connection between two of the terminals, bypassing the fuses. Power surged unchecked through the cable, racing at the speed of light into the lighting gantry above the set...

Jack flinched at what sounded like a muffled gunshot, a few people in the audience actually gasping in fright. The lighting dimmed

slightly; looking up, he saw that one of the spotlights had gone out, its last glow fading as he watched.

Katie had clearly experienced similar events before. "Just a little problem with the lights," she assured everyone, looking over at the floor manager behind the cameras. He was listening to someone up in the control room behind the audience's seats through his earpiece. Jack wondered if he were going to call for a cut, but after a moment he simply nodded and gave Katie a thumbs-up. "Nothing to worry about," she announced, smiling, before turning back to Jack.

High above, unnoticed, electricity was still feeding into the blown spotlight. A small but powerful spark, a wisp of smoke from melted insulation... and the circuits inside the lamp's black metal casing began to overheat rapidly, buzzing like a furious wasp.

The broken lamp was one of four mounted onto one of the studio's lighting rigs, the whole affair weighing several hundred pounds. The hanging rig was attached to the studio ceiling by steel cables that allowed it to be lowered so the lights could be adjusted or bulbs replaced.

The cables ran through pulley wheels at each end of the rig. The wheels were metal, but the bearings at their centers were plastic—partly to provide electrical insulation, and partly to eliminate the need for lubrication. Under normal circumstances, the bearings would have easily been able to withstand the heat rising from the studio lights.

But the short-circuiting lamp, directly beneath the pulley wheel, had already passed this limit, and the temperature was still rising fast.

Slowly but steadily, the plastic began to soften.

Eight blocks was a lot further to run than it seemed, especially when you had to dodge pedestrians and cars at the intersections.

Even though she thought she kept in pretty good shape, with regular sessions at the gym, Amy was soon out of breath.

And she still had two more blocks to go.

"We'll be back after the break with more of the amazing story of Jack Curtis," said Katie into one of the cameras. "Until then, see the light!"

"And feel the love!" the audience chorused. Katie beamed into the camera until a red light atop it went out, and the floor manager made a cutting gesture before turning to the audience and announcing that recording would restart in two minutes. A make-up woman rushed onto the set and quickly applied more powder to Katie's face.

"How are you doing?" she asked Jack as the woman worked.

"Still a bit nervous," he said, desperately wanting to wipe his forehead but worried that it would wreck his make-up. "And hot."

"You'll be fine. You've done a great job so far, Jack. Just keep it up. You know, I think you might have a bit of a knack for this."

"Really?" The make-up woman turned her attention to Jack, dabbing at his face.

"I bet that after this segment airs, you'll have a lot of offers to tell your story."

"Yeah, I guess I might," he said, with a twinge of guilt about accepting Holly Jo's offer.

Above, the plastic bearing, already softened by the fierce heat, began to split in two, a hairline crack widening as the sheer weight of the lighting rig pressed down against it...

Lungs burning, leg muscles aching, Amy raced across the street, ignoring the blare of car horns. Katie's building loomed ahead, a dark block against the sky.

She burst through the doors into the lobby, the security guard behind the reception desk looking up in surprise. She spotted a sign directing her to Katie's studio and hared off in that direction. The guard yelled after her, but she ignored him.

"And we're back in three, two..."

The floor manager silently mouthed "one" before pointing at Katie, who had turned to face the camera again. The audience applauded, obeying the flashing signs above the front of the set.

"Welcome back!" Katie smiled. "We're here today with Jack Curtis, a man of great courage with an incredible story to tell. A story that I played a part in—a man to whom I owe my life."

The audience applauded again. Jack looked out at them, feeling much less self-conscious about accepting the praise this time.

The split in the bearing widened, the two halves starting to bend outwards in opposite directions-

Amy ran down a corridor. Another guard was standing by the doors at the far end, striding forward with one hand raised. "Woah, where you goin'?"

"Police!" she yelled hoarsely, breath rasping in her throat. "Let me through!"

The guard moved to intercept her. "Hey, just stop there, okay!" She tried to dodge past, but in her exhaustion wasn't fast enough to avoid the outstretched arm that snagged her coat and jerked her to a halt. "Hold it!"

"I'm NYPD, damn it!" she croaked.

The guard didn't buy it. "Let's see a badge." Amy scowled. Her police badge was at the precinct along with her gun, where she'd had to hand them in upon being suspended.

There wasn't time for this. Jack was in danger right now!

She whipped up her hands and grabbed the startled guard's arm, twisting sharply and forcing him into an armlock. He yelped in pain, dropping to his knees as Amy pushed his arm up even higher behind his back. Rentacops. They didn't have a clue.

Although, she realized, after today it might be the only job she could get...

The guard was practically squealing now; she drove her elbow into the small of his back and knocked him face-first onto the polished floor before turning and charging the last few yards to the studio doors-

"I didn't exactly have other *visions*," said Jack, "but I saw... signs, I suppose, little clues that..."

The doors at the top of the stairs between the ranks of seats flew open with a bang. "*Jack!*" a woman screamed.

Amy?

"Jack!" She vaulted down the stairs two and three at a time. "It's you! *You're the sixth victim!* Something's about to happen to you!"

Not sure what to do, Jack stood up in surprise.

Katie stared at her, confused. "Amy? What are you doing..."

The bearing gave way, breaking into two pieces, each popping out from opposite sides of the pulley wheel.

Without the bearing to support it, the metal wheel, and the rest of that end of the lighting rig, fell. It was only a small drop, less than half an inch, before it was caught by the axle running through the center of the wheel.

But when something weighs several hundred pounds, even a fall that short still has a powerful impact.

The steel cable jerked, twanging like a guitar string. The force of the drop was transmitted up it to the studio ceiling, to where the rig was attached.

The bolts holding it in place were ripped out of the ceiling in a shower of plaster and concrete.

One end of the rig dropped, the sudden jolt tearing the bolts supporting the *other* end from the roof.

The entire lighting rig plummeted towards the stage floor...

...until the electrical cables feeding power to the lights snapped taut.

The rigging holding the power lines to the ceiling somehow stayed intact. The rig jerked and spun, the shock through the cables affecting its neighbors. More bulbs blew out violently as the rigs shook, sparks and fragments of glass raining down onto the set.

Amy saw the falling rig swinging at frightening speed on its tangled trail of cables.

Towards Jack...

With all her strength, she leapt from the stairs and threw herself at Jack, tackling him and slamming him to the studio floor...

Just as the lighting rig swung through the exact spot where he'd been standing!

Jack felt the wind from the huge hunk of metal whip through his hair as he landed on his back. A moment later he heard a huge crash as the lighting rig smashed straight through the back wall of the set, wood cracking and splintering. Somewhere through the noise, he heard people screaming.

But he was still alive!

Amy pushed herself off his chest, jumping to her feet and holding a hand out to him. She gave him a smile of relief...

And in the corner of his eye, through the jagged hole in the back of the set, Jack saw the lighting rig swinging *back* at them.

At her...

Reacting entirely on instinct, he twisted his lower body, sweeping his legs around in a hard kick at the back of her legs.

Amy's knees buckled under the unexpected blow and she fell backwards with a cry...

As the lights swept past again, so close that one of the black metal flaps on the lowest spotlight sliced through her coat like a blade and cut a deep bloody slash into her shoulder.

The power cables finally tore free of the studio ceiling. The lighting rig dropped to the floor with a deafening screech of tortured metal, the cables cracking like whips. More lamps blew out above, the remaining rigs rattling.

Amy sat up, a stunned look on her face. "Jack, what...?"

"It started again!" Jack said. "The list, death's list—it started again! If I was the last one, and you saved me..." Amy's expression changed to one of dawning horror. "Then it went back to the beginning. It went back to you!"

"But then *you* saved *me* again," Amy replied. "Which means the next person is..."

They looked round at Katie.

Katie stood up, still trying to take in what had just happened. She gazed in amazement at Jack and Amy lying amongst the splintered wreckage of her set, then at the mangled lighting rig that had almost killed them both, just a few feet away from her. Sparks popped and spat from one of the crushed spotlights.

"Is everyone okay?" she called out.

Jack cautiously got up. "I think so," he said.

Katie let out a sharp breath of relief. "Oh, thank the Lord! It's a miracle!"

"But Katie, you've got to be careful. You're next..."

With a screech of tearing steel, a spotlight dropped from the shuddering lighting rig directly above Katie.

She looked up at the noise to see a brilliant light rushing at her, dazzling, blinding, *searing*...

It hit...

...and the wiring trailing behind it reached its limit, snapping it to an abrupt stop just as the huge bulb exploded in Katie's upturned face.

She fell to the floor as if pounded down by a hammer, blood spurting from the wounds gouged into her face by the knife-like shards of glass. The sheer heat from the lamp had singed her hair, wisps of smoke rising from the shriveled strands.

"Katie!" Amy shrieked.

But she was still alive, still moving. Too stunned to scream, she crawled forward, hands patting blindly at the floor in front of her. "Jack? I—I can't see..."

Jack saw that she was reaching for the fallen lighting rig.

Which was still crackling with sparks, still *live*...

"Katie, stop!" he started to yell...

Too late.

Katie's outstretched hands touched the metal frame...

And clamped around it as a massive current surged through her, every nerve in her body convulsing under the intense blue fire. Flames erupted from her hands, her hair, her clothes...

"Shut off the power!" Jack yelled at the technicians, who were frozen in shock and disbelief. "Shut it *off*!"

Amy grabbed a chunk of broken wood from the remains of the set and thrust it at Katie, trying to break her free from the source of the current. But it was no good. Her hands were locked immovably around the framework of the lighting rig, her burned, sightless eyes staring desperately up at Amy as the flames encircled her face.

By the time somebody had reached the studio's main circuit panel and thrown a breaker switch, cutting off everything except the emergency lights, all that remained of Katie Astin was a blackened, smoking corpse. The sickening stench of charred meat filled the studio.

Jack slumped onto the couch, his head buried in his hands. Another person was dead. And once again, he hadn't been able to save them.

THIRTEEN

The only thing louder than Placido Domingo as he boomed "Otello" from the expensive loud-speakers in Joshua Cornell III's apartment was Joshua himself, his voice practically a scream over the thunderous music. "You said it was over! You told me that it was fucking *over*!"

"I thought it was!" Jack protested.

"For God's sake," Amy added angrily, "will you turn that noise down?" The volume was so high that the fallen framed platinum record propped up in front of the large bass speaker was rattling, reflections from the cracked glass dancing across the opposite wall.

"Uh-uh! No way!" Joshua took a large mouthful from the glass of red wine he was holding, gulping it down before pacing back and forth in front of his surviving shelves of stereo equipment. "If I'm on a death list, then you know what? Fuck everyone else! If I'm gonna die next, then I'm gonna die doing exactly whatever the hell I want!"

"You don't know you're going to die next, Joshua," she said, trying to calm him.

"Oh no?" Joshua jabbed a finger at her. "You? Alive. Reporter? Dead! Garbage guy? Dead! Katie? Dead! Who's next on the list? Oh, wait! It's *me*!" He swigged the remainder of his wine before snatching up the open bottle of Chateauneuf-du-Pape from the floor and hastily refilling his glass, spilled drops staining the white carpet.

"You, ah, should put something on those before they stain..." Jack offered, lacking anything reassuring to say.

Joshua glared at him. "I've got a better idea—how about I let my *beneficiaries* handle it?"

"Joshua!" Amy snapped. "This isn't helping! You're not helping! The more panicked you get, the more likely you are to have an accident!"

"I'm not panicking!" Joshua yelled. "I'm *shit-scared*!" At that moment the phone rang; he slammed his glass down on the stereo shelves with a clink before striding across the room to snatch up the receiver. "What? Yeah, I thought you might be calling, Broates. Now

you listen to me—you tell that hatchet-faced old bitch downstairs that she can go fuck herself! Yeah, in those exact words! And if she has any problems with that, then Masta Thugg's gonna come down there and give her a demonstration!" He banged the receiver down so hard that the plastic cracked, then grabbed the whole phone and yanked it from its socket, flinging it across the room. "Fuck!"

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Feeling better now?"

"Not really, no." Joshua stomped over to the window and stared out across the darkening city, breathing heavily, before turning back to Jack and Amy. "Listen, you two—you've got to help me, you've got to keep me alive."

"I don't know if we can," said Jack helplessly.

"Then you'd better *try*, God damn it!" Joshua banged a clenched fist against the wall, leaving a slight dent in the plasterboard beneath the expensive wallpaper. He stared at it for a moment, the pain in his hand bringing him back to a more rational state. "Listen, it's not just me you'd be helping. It'd be you too. You said that after she saved you, then the list started again from the beginning, then when you saved *her* Katie was next?" Jack nodded. "Then that means after I die, *you're* next. It's in your best interests to keep me alive, 'cause as long as I stay alive, so do you." He switched his gaze to Amy. "And as long as he's okay, then so are you. See? We need some kind of... mutual defense pact."

"We can't watch each other's backs twenty-four hours a day," Jack objected, walking over to Joshua. Past the record producer, through the window, he spotted the moon peeking through the clouds above the buildings across the street. The Eye of Artemis, still watching the city. *How long was that damn thing going to stay full?*

"What, you got something better to do, got a clock to punch?" Joshua demanded, voice dripping with sarcasm. "And you?" He looked at Amy. "I hear you're not going to be playing Pepper Anderson again any time soon, either."

"*What?*" Amy took an angry step towards him. "How did you find out about that? And I'm not *playing* anything!" She waved a dismissive hand at the platinum record. "At least I'm not a fake!"

Jack stepped between them. "This isn't *helping*, all right? Jesus! Look, we've got to stay calm. We know that whatever it is that's trying to kill us—fate, death, whatever you want to call it—sets up 'accidents' to do it. So we have to be careful, and watch out for anything that might *cause* an accident. Okay?"

"And how long are we going to have to keep looking over our shoulders?" Joshua wanted to know. "You know how many different ways there are to get your ass killed? Are we going to have to stay paranoid for the rest of our lives?"

"I don't know..." The sight of the moon through the window caught Jack's attention again. Something about it—*the full moon*...

Amy saw his intent expression. "Jack? What is it?"

"I'm not sure. What if..."

He was interrupted by a muffled thumping noise, audible even through the clamour of the opera. They all exchanged nervous glances, before Joshua realized what was causing it.

"I don't fucking believe it," he spat, walking to the centre of the room. "It's that old bitch downstairs. She's banging on her fucking ceiling! Probably using her broomstick." He stamped hard on the carpet, three times. "Shut the fuck up!"

"You know," said Amy through gritted teeth, "if you turned that down it'd make it a hell of a lot easier for us to think in here."

"Yeah, yeah." Joshua waved a dismissive hand and went over to the stereo, turning the volume control even higher. Jack could *feel* the bass in the pit of his stomach; the windows started to shake, vibrating in time to the music. The wine was actually rippling as the glass rattled on the shelf, while on the floor below, the reflections from the cracked glass jittered crazily over the walls.

"You like that, huh?" Joshua demanded of the floor, walking back to the middle of the room. "And that's not even half of it! Fuck eleven, this goes up to *thirty*!"

"For God's sake!" Amy cried, wincing at the noise.

"I'll turn it down in a minute. I just to show her that nobody *fucks* with the Masta! You know something? I'm not even scared any more. I'm just mad!" He raised his head and shouted up at the ceiling, arms spread wide. "Fuck you, death! Fuck y—"

His wineglass, which had trembled its way to the edge of the vibrating shelf, tipped over and smashed on top of the big bass speaker.

Joshua froze, staring at the sight in horror.

"Okay," said Amy cautiously after a pause, "let's not piss off death any more, huh? At least nothing happened this—"

A wave ran through the pool of red wine on the top of the speaker's jet-black wooden case as if blown by a gust of wind, sweeping the liquid over its back.

And down into the air vents, onto the wiring, the heavy-duty power transformer...

With an ear-splitting shriek of feedback, the speaker exploded.

The glass and frame of the platinum record blew apart, showering everyone with fragments of debris. The record itself shot across the room...

For a moment, Jack thought that it had gone right past Joshua to embed itself with a loud *chunk* two inches deep in the far wall like a circular saw blade.

Then Joshua's head tilted back.

Rather, the lower half tilted back, a little. The upper half moved further, and kept going.

Fine jets of blood sprayed out from severed blood vessels in both halves of the brain as the top of Joshua's skull slid back until it fell from the rest of his body, landing on the carpet with a wet splat, both eyes wide open and staring. The lower part of his face, beneath the almost perfectly straight line sliced from the base of his nose back through his ears, still held an expression of disbelief.

Then the body collapsed, pitching forward to land with a dull thump, its half a head landing amongst the smoldering remains of the destroyed loudspeaker and the shattered frame that had once held an accolade to the now dead man.

The apartment fell silent as the opera came to an end. Amy let out a faint, horrified moan. Jack clutched her, all too horribly aware of the truth of something Joshua had said.

With Joshua dead... he was next.

"What are we *doing* here?" Amy asked, not for the first time. The gothic facade of St Vincent's hospital stabbed upwards at the moonlit sky, its decorative towers and spires striking at the eye of the moon. Jack had barely said a word since they'd left Joshua's apartment; Amy had wanted to stay at the scene of the death and tell the police exactly what had happened, but he'd insisted on leaving, and made it clear that he was going to go with or without her.

"There's someone I want to see," he said grimly.

"Who? Bill the mortician?"

"No. Lonnie."

Some of the hospital staff on duty recognized Amy; it didn't take long before she and Jack were able to gain access to one of the wards, despite visiting hours long being over. Other patients, limbs cast in plaster, bandages bound tightly around heads and torsos, watched silently as they made their way to a bed at the far end.

Lonnie looked up in surprise when he saw he had visitors. He blinked, almost doing a double-take before peering more closely at them. "Jack?" His voice sounded croaky, rusty, as if he hadn't used it for some time.

Jack smiled down at him. "Hey, Lonnie."

"Jack!" Lonnie looked him up and down, taking in his new clothes, the haircut, the lack of a beard. "What happened to you?"

"I've had an... interesting couple of days," Jack told him.

"Looks like you've had a *lucky* couple of days! You got a suit, you got a cute new friend..." He offered Amy a feeble wave, then grimaced in pain. Jack saw that his chest was bandaged, binding his broken ribs. "I'm guessin' you came into some money."

"Yeah, Lonnie, I did. That's why I'm here." Jack looked around, spying a notepad and pen on the cabinet by the next bed. "Do you mind if I borrow a page from that?"

The patient, a middle-aged man with one leg in plaster, shrugged. "Go ahead. Not like I'm going to write the great American novel in here."

"Thanks."

"Jack, what are you doing?" asked Amy.

"I need a witness."

"To what?"

"To this." Jack started writing, reciting each new word as it left the pen. "I, Jack Curtis, being of sound mind..."

"*What?*" Amy exclaimed in disbelief. "Jack, what are you *doing*?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. I'm making my will."

"You can't be serious! Jack, that's almost like giving up, like you're *expecting* to get killed!"

"I'm not planning on dying just yet," he assured her. "And I think I might even have worked out a way that we can stay alive. Both of us. But just in case I'm wrong... I want to make sure that at least I won't have died for nothing." He continued writing for a short while longer, then tore the top page from the pad and handed it to Amy. "What do you think? Is it legal?"

"New York State law says a will only needs two witness signatures from non-beneficiaries to be a valid legal document," Amy told him, her voice briefly turning all-business before returning to its previous appalled state. "Jack, are you really sure you want to do this?"

He gave her a half-smile. "What, you want a bigger share of my estate?"

"Jack, this isn't *funny*!"

"I know, which is why I'm serious about this." He turned to the patient in the neighboring bed. "You ever witnessed a will?"

"Can't say that I have," the man said, intrigued.

"You want to?"

He shrugged again. "Sure."

Lonnie struggled to lift himself off the bed as the other man took the sheet of paper and signed it. "Jack, what the hell are you doin'?"

Jack leaned down to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "If I die, you get half of everything I have. Which isn't much, I admit, but it's better than nothing. You said you'd been given a second chance. If anything happens to me, this'll help you do that."

"You say that like you're *expectin'* to die," said Lonnie, regarding Jack intently.

Jack couldn't meet his gaze; he looked away at the other patients nearby, who were regarding the scene with interest. "Anyone else want to witness a will?" A couple of hands went up.

"Jack, this is insane," Amy protested.

"And the last few days *haven't* been?" he shot back, walking to another bed to get a second signature. "Okay, two signatures, signed and dated. Guess this is now legal." He came back to Lonnie's bedside, folding the piece of paper in two and holding it out to Lonnie. "Guess you'd better take care of that."

"Why are you doin' this, Jack?" asked Lonnie, reluctantly accepting it.

"Because I owe you. You helped me when I most needed it." Jack turned to Amy, taking her hand. "And so did you. So if I don't make it, at least I can pay you back some of what I owe."

Amy's eyes glistened, but she managed to hold back any tears. "Jack..."

He moved closer to her, gently putting his arms around her waist. "But I'm not just giving up, Amy. I promise. I don't want to die, and I'm going to do everything I can to avoid it. Because Joshua was right. As long as I stay alive, *you're* safe."

Now the tears came. "But how are we going to keep you safe? This thing, whatever it is... it can get at us anywhere, any time!"

She nestled her face against Jack's shoulder. He tipped his head and kissed her hair. "I've got an idea about that. I don't know if it'll work... but I've got to try."

Blinking away the tears, Amy looked up at him questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"I'll show you. We've got to go." Almost unwilling to break the physical connection, he released Amy and turned back to Lonnie. "Lonnie, if I don't see you again... thanks for everything. You just promise me that you'll make the most of your life once you get out of here. Okay?"

"Okay." Lonnie held out a hand, which Jack shook—before bending down to give him a careful hug, trying not to touch his injuries.

"Thanks for everything," Jack said. Taking Amy's hand again, he led her out of the ward, giving Lonnie one last look before the doors swung shut behind them.

Outside on the street, the wind had picked up, the cold cutting through their clothing like blades. There was a taxi rank nearby, a couple of battered yellow cabs waiting at it. Jack hurried towards them.

"Jack, wait," Amy called. "This plan of yours—what is it?"

For an answer, he pointed up into the sky, at the intense white disc of the moon. "The Eye of Artemis," he said.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"It's still open, but not for long. How long does a full moon last?"

"Technically just one day, I guess, but it *looks* full for three or four days altogether. Why?"

They reached the cabs, Jack pausing at the rear door of the first car. "Because the killer was going to do all his work while the moon was full, while the Eye was wide open."

"So?"

"So, as soon as the moon *stops* being full, then that means the window of opportunity's closed. Time's up."

Amy regarded him incredulously. "*That's* your idea how to stay alive?"

"I know it doesn't sound much, but... I dunno, it just *feels* right. I can't explain it."

She opened the door. "Maybe it is right. I mean, I've seen enough weird shit in the last few days to convince me that there's things we can't explain. But I hate to point this out, Jack, there's a full moon *every single month*, regular as clockwork."

Jack followed her into the back of the cab. "Yeah, I know that's... kind of a problem. But the rest of the time, I think we'll be safe. It's only during the full moon that we have to watch out." Amy told the driver to take them back to her apartment. "So, fine most of the time, and then three or four days a month of mortal terror and death

waiting around every corner?" She shook her head helplessly. "I'm not exactly thrilled with that!"

"Neither am I. But it's better than the alternative."

"You seriously think you're right? That once the moon stops being full, we're safe?"

Jack leaned over to look out of the window. The moon flickered between the passing skyscrapers as they drove through the city, a faint shadow discernible on the edge of the disc, darkness starting to obscure the perfect circle of white. An eye closing. "Yeah. I do. If we can just make it through tonight... I think we'll be fine."

"Until the next full moon," Amy reminded him.

"But at least we know when it's coming. We can take precautions."

"So, we make a panic room with no sharp objects, no electricity and nothing flammable and hole up in it for three or four days a month, right?"

"Something like that."

"So what do we do while we're in there?"

"I'm sure we'll think of something." They both managed to smile at that.

The glimpses she got of the moon overhead as the cab made its way back to her neighborhood made Amy increasingly uneasy. If Jack were right, that once the moon was no longer full they would be safe, then whatever supernatural force was trying to kill them might well decide to make a concerted attempt before time ran out. And a New York cab, driving through snow-slicked streets, was not exactly the safest vehicle on earth. At every intersection she found herself checking the other roads for any sign of a truck or bus barreling towards them...

But they reached her apartment building safely. As she got out, though, she spotted the instantly-recognizable blue-and-white livery of an NYPD squad car parked across the street. She didn't need to look through its window to know who was inside.

"What are you doing, Pete?" she asked, after tapping on the window and waiting for Beriev to wind it down.

"I heard about Katie Astin getting whacked, and now that rapper guy's dead too—what do you *think* I'm doing here, Amy?" Beriev growled. "I wanted to make sure you were okay!" He caught sight of Jack behind her and frowned, but said nothing.

"I'm fine, Pete, and you don't need to sit around in the cold outside my apartment all night."

Beriev gave her an almost expectant look, as if hoping to be invited inside, but his face quickly darkened when Jack, quite deliberately, Amy was sure, reached out and put a hand on her arm. She shot him a warning glance, but didn't pull away.

"You're not fine," Beriev finally said, seeing the tear in her clothes and the bandage, applied by a first-aider at the studio, visible beneath. "What the hell happened there?"

"Nothing serious, I'll live. Look, I'm okay, really. You don't have to worry about me, Pete."

"How can I *not*, Amy? For Christ's sake! Ever since this guy showed up you've been attacked, you've been involved in all these weird-ass deaths, and now you've been suspended! You need to get as far from this guy as you can before you throw your life away! Is that what you want?"

"Pete," Amy said, part-angry, part-sad, at the knowledge that she was about to drive the final wedge between herself and her former partner—and mentor, and friend. "The only chance I've got of *not* throwing my life away is for me to stick with Jack and watch out for him, and have him watch out for me. I don't expect you to understand, Pete, and I'm sorry, but it's what I've got to do."

Beriev's voice was stony, emotionless. "I see."

"Pete, I'm sorry, I really am." She reached through the window and put her hand on his shoulder. Beriev didn't respond to the touch, staring fixedly ahead. "I'm sorry," she repeated, slowly withdrawing her hand.

"Well, then," said Beriev, the muscles around his mouth tight with contained emotion, "I guess that's it." He turned the ignition key, the

engine roaring to life and sending clouds of billowing exhaust fumes into the cold air.

"Pete..."

"I just hope you're not making a big mistake, Amy. Have a good life." He gunned the engine and the police car pulled away sharply, kicking up a spray of slush in its wake.

Amy stood and watched the car head off down the street, feeling a prickling in her eyes that had nothing to do with the stinging fumes swirling around her. Jack stepped up behind her, reaching round to take her hands in his. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I've had better days," she told him over her shoulder, her voice catching slightly. "Come on. Let's get inside before the *cold* kills us."

The apartment was warm, welcoming—and, Jack thought, full of potential dangers. A vase holding a couple of flowers could tip over and spill its water onto the back of the TV, causing a deadly short; a tall bookshelf might topple and crush him; a flex running across the floor to the phone could trip him up and pitch him head-first against the unyielding metal corner of the radiator. Then there were the gas pipes and knives in the kitchen, bleaches and other poisonous cleaning products in the bathroom, the risk of a fire that might spread through the building, trapping him and Amy inside...

Stop it, he told himself. There's preparedness, and then there's paranoia.

Besides, neither of them had seen any signs of danger. That was what they had to watch for. If they saw the signs, then they could take precautions. They still had a chance.

He had a chance. He was next on the list. As long as he could stay alive, then Amy would be safe.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked, eyeing him cautiously as he examined the living room.

"Just playing it safe." He moved to the center of the room and slowly turned around to take everything in. Nothing seemed in imminent danger of falling, igniting or exploding, so he finally sat

down on the couch. He peered suspiciously at Amy's tall bird sculpture next to him. Thick, twisted wires with sharply-snipped ends, thin, razor-edged sheets of metal over them...

"Do you want me to move that?" Amy asked, seeing his dubious expression.

"It might be an idea." He gingerly touched the tips of the wires that formed the sculpture's beak. It didn't seem heavy enough to cause any damage if it somehow fell on him, but better safe than dead...

Amy picked it up and moved it to one side of the room, putting it down next to a tall lamp. "Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Light from outside attracted his attention, and he got up and went over to the window. Pale moonlight gleamed off the snow coating the building opposite, the moon itself still watching him balefully. He was about to pull the curtains closed to block its view when another light, this one down at street level, caught his eye. A patrol car, slowly cruising past the building. Had Beriev returned? He couldn't see the driver from his high vantage point.

"Do you want a coffee or something?" Amy asked.

The curtains forgotten, he turned to her, deciding not to mention the passing police car. It might not even be Beriev. "It's a bit late—it'll keep me up all night."

"That's kind of what I was hoping," Amy said with a faint, tired hint of a suggestive grin. "After everything that's happened today, I really think we should be together tonight."

"Well, in *that* case..."

Amy smiled and went into the kitchen, Jack hearing rushing water and various clanks as she filled the kettle and put it on the hob. Suddenly paranoid again, he went into the kitchen after her. "What?" she asked, concern flashing across her face.

"Nothing. Just checking. You know, gas, water, something could go wrong... Just being careful." He surveyed the room. The blue flames beneath the kettle were burning normally, the hiss of the gas coming from the hob and nowhere else. There were no precariously-balanced objects on top of the cabinets that could fall, the only knives he could see were safely resting blades-first in their wooden block, and Amy showed no inclination towards reaching into the garbage disposal...

"Jack," Amy chided, "everything's okay. Just go and sit down, I'll bring them out when they're ready."

"Okay." He kissed her, then with a last sidelong glance at the knives went back into the living room. "We need to think about how we're going to take precautions, though. Even if we get through tonight..."

Amy's voice came from behind him over the slowly rising noise of the kettle reaching a boil. "Jack, we're *going* to get through tonight, okay? I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"All right, *when* we get through tonight, we're going to have to figure out what to do when the next full moon comes around."

"Well, it sounds like we're going to have to essentially baby-proof the entire apartment. Make sure there's nothing that some bizarre chain of events could hurt us with." The kettle started to whistle.

"Easier said than done." He got up again and went to the shelves, examining a couple of Amy's smaller sculptures, a stylized cat and mouse of wire and bent copper.

Light flickered past them, sending their shadows dancing momentarily across the wall behind the shelves. A large vehicle was rumbling down the street outside, reflections from its lights glancing off the windows of the building opposite. In silhouette, the cat caught the mouse...

Was that a sign?

Jack spun and, heart suddenly pounding, looked around the room, checking every corner, every cranny, for signs of impending danger. The kettle reached a screaming crescendo, before abruptly tailing off as Amy lifted it from the hob.

Nothing was moving. But he remained still, barely daring to breathe.

"Jack?" When he didn't answer immediately, Amy leaned anxiously over the counter, hunting for him. "Jack! What is it? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, the moment of tension gone. "I just thought I saw something, that's all."

"Was it another sign?"

"I don't know... I don't think so," he admitted. "Maybe I'm just a bit jumpy."

"You're not the only one. Jeez, please don't do that again. I nearly had a heart attack."

Amy retreated into the kitchen again as Jack carefully walked around the living room, taking care not to trip on the phone wire, and went back to the window. It had been a garbage truck that had caused the reflection. He wondered if it had been one of Donahue's vehicles, and what Dawson's death would have meant to the people working for him...

Son of a bitch!

It *had* been Beriev's patrol car driving past earlier. Jack remembered the number painted on its roof. He had returned to his parking spot across the street after having apparently circled the block, and Jack could see him sitting inside the car, staring up at the apartment. The guy just couldn't take a hint.

"Sugar?"

"Huh?" Jack answered, distracted.

"Do you want any sugar in your coffee?"

"Uh... yeah, just one, thanks." He pulled back from the window, debating whether or not to tell Amy that Beriev was back. He decided against it. She had enough on her mind as it was.

Instead, he opted to go and help Amy in the kitchen. He turned around...

...and his foot caught the leg of the craft table by the window.

The little brazing torch Amy used for her sculptures wobbled, then fell onto its side.

And dropped over the edge of the table.

Jack grabbed for it, but a fraction of a second too late. The torch fell to the floor, landing on its trigger with a loud clack.

Right below to the long curtains...

He jumped back from the table, expecting the torch to light, flames to rush up the fabric of the curtains.

But nothing happened.

The torch came to rest with its nozzle pointing away from anything flammable, inert.

"Jesus!" Amy gasped behind him. Jack realized that he'd almost backed into her as she emerged from the kitchen. Hot coffee spilled over the brims of the mugs in each of her hands.

"Sorry!" he said, indicating the fallen torch. "I just knocked it onto the floor, and thought it was going to light..."

"Not without a match," Amy said, holding the mugs away from her body as coffee trickled over her hands, dripping onto the floor. "Ow, ow, shit..."

"Sorry," Jack said again. "Here, let me take them." He reached out and gingerly took the hot cups from her hands, putting them on the table in front of the couch. "Are you okay?"

She waggled her fingers, her nose scrunching in slight distaste. "Yeah, just a bit sticky, that's all. Let me go and rinse this off." She went back into the kitchen as Jack picked up the fallen brazing torch, giving it a careful check to make sure that it wasn't damaged or leaking before putting it back on Amy's craft table, well away from the sides.

God. He really *was* on edge. His heart was absolutely racing, the surge of fear-driven adrenaline still churning in his stomach.

Okay, calm down. Nothing had happened; he was still safe.

For the moment.

A glimpse of light in the corner of his eye reminded him that he was still under silent observation by the full moon. *Not after tonight*, he told himself. He still couldn't explain it, even to himself, but he was now more sure than ever that surviving the night would give him and Amy a reprieve from the lurking threat that had been stalking them. Even if it were only temporary, it would still give them time to devise a proper plan, to work out how to stay alive until the next full moon came around.

For now, though, he was sick of the damn thing watching him. Jack went to the window, about to pull the curtains shut and block out the world beyond when Amy came back from the kitchen. "Hey," she said, smiling.

"Hey." Jack smiled back. Amy walked around the couch towards him...

...and stepped on a puddle of spilled coffee, the individual drops having somehow pooled together on the polished wooden floorboards.

With a yelp of surprise, Amy fell forward as her foot slipped out from beneath her. She crashed into the lamp, knocking it over and breaking the bulb, and let out a startled little gasp as she landed. Her hands clutched weakly at something underneath her.

Jack hurried from the window to help her, turning her over. "Amy! Are you o—"

He stopped, horrified.

Amy had fallen onto her bird sculpture—and the pointed beak was now embedded deep into her chest, right over her heart. Dark blood was gushing freely from the wound. She struggled to say something, her eyes wide with pain and fear.

Jack stared at her as the blood ran down her side, pooling on the wooden floor. "No," he gasped, paralyzed with helpless disbelief. This couldn't be happening! "No! It's not your turn! It's meant to be me next! *It's meant to be me!*"

She managed to lift one hand to the sculpture, the wires twisted and bent. "Get... get it out..."

He snapped out of his paralysis and took hold of the sculpture around its elongated neck, trying to pull it away without hurting Amy.

It didn't move.

He pulled harder. Amy screamed. Some of the wires twisted and squashed together in his hand as he tightened his grip, but the sharp metal of the beak stayed put.

The tip of the beak was bent *inside* her, he realized, hooked around her ribs. But he had to get the thing free or there would be no way for him to hold in the blood pumping from the open wound...

Jack shifted his grip, now holding the beak itself. The razor edges of the thin copper plating around it sliced into the flesh of his hand, but he ignored the pain.

Amy's eyes were now filled with terror, desperation.

"Amy!" he cried. Her gaze flicked to him. "Amy, look at me, just hold on, please, *hold on!*"

One hand pushing down against her collarbone, he tightened his hold on the sculpture, feeling his own blood oozing over his skin, and *pulled...*

With an almost animalistic groan of strained metal, the beak ripped free of Amy's chest, torn, wet strands of skin still impaled on the mangled tips of the wires. A gush of hot blood sprayed from the wound into Jack's face. Amy convulsed beneath him, letting out a piercing shriek of agony.

Shocked, Jack wiped the blood from his eyes before hurriedly pressing the flat of his uninjured hand down onto the pumping wound. He looked around desperately for the phone, knowing that if he didn't call 911 and get Amy to a hospital fast, she was going to die.

But she couldn't die—not before him! He hadn't done anything to cheat death again, so he was still meant to be next!

The phone was on the small table at the far end of the couch, out of reach.

If he took his hand off the wound, blood would spurt from it, each beat of her heart draining her life away onto the floor of her apartment. But if he didn't, she would die anyway—it would just take longer...

The phone wire, running across the floor behind the couch, disappearing under a small rug. Maybe he could hook it with something...

The sculpture!

He grabbed it by the base of its legs, his hand stinging as the cuts touched the blackened metal. Still trying to keep his other hand firmly pressed down against Amy's chest, Jack jabbed the now flattened and deformed piece of art in the direction of the phone. If he could hook the cable and pull the phone off the table, maybe even just stab the tip of the beak into the rug and drag the whole thing towards him...

The beak banged down against the floorboards, catching nothing. He was just inches short. He tried again, feeling wetness well up beneath his hand as he inadvertently eased the pressure on the wound. Amy gasped.

"Come on," Jack said desperately as he clawed for the wire. "Come on!"

It was no good. It remained just out of his reach, a mere finger's-length beyond the reach of the blood-slicked sculpture. But it might as well have been a mile.

"Jack..." Amy's voice was no more than a trembling, pleading whisper. He dropped the metal bird and moved back to her, grasping her hand. Tears were welling in her dark eyes. "I don't want to die..."

"You can't die!" Jack's own vision blurred with tears. "You can't! It's not your turn! It's supposed to be *me*!"

The apartment door flew open with a bang, wood splintering from the frame around the lock.

Jack snapped his head around to see Beriev burst into the room, his gun held in both hands ahead of him. The cop's face was full of frantic worry, which changed to a twisted snarl of pure hate when his eyes fixed on Jack, crouching over the blood-covered form of Amy...

"Get off her, you motherfucker!"

"Pete, *no*!" Amy tried to say, but her voice was too weak for Beriev to hear even if he had been listening...

Beriev fired.

Jack felt as though someone had smashed him in the chest with the spike of a pickaxe, one, two, *three* burning, red-hot spikes of agony slamming him backwards. He crashed down on his back, the *crack* as his skull hit the floorboards nothing compared to the unimaginable pain searing through his body.

His ears were ringing with the sound of the shots, nostrils filled with the acrid stench of burned gunpowder. The metallic taste of blood welled in his mouth. Every nerve was on fire, the pain overwhelming.

And above him, through the window, he saw the cold white disc of the moon casting its unearthly light onto him.

Time seemed to speed up as darkness closed in around the edges of Jack's vision. He could hear Beriev's voice, but the words were echoing, meaningless. He wanted nothing more than to turn his head, to look at Amy one last time, but couldn't move.

The last thing he saw was a shadow, a perfect black arc, sweeping across the face of the moon. The Eye of Artemis closed, the full moon finally over.